

# *The Narrow Corridor*

MOMENTS IN  
A WOMAN'S LIFE

Muriel Wasi

*The Narrow Corridor* brings together autobiographical writings and essays on crucial educational theories and practices by the late Muriel Wasi. The autobiographical writings reveal a sensitive, probing, independent mind.

While "Fugue" is a confession of the mystery of the sea of which Muriel first became fully conscious in Goa as a child, "The Dining Room" is a poignant evocation of her parents' desire to make of their home "a country of our own", a sovereignty with no boundaries. "Through the Wilderness" and "The Golden Years" are a vivid portrait of Muriel's stepping out of this "country of her own".

In "On My Own" and "A Spanish Proverb", one finds Muriel immersed as a writer in the war effort against Hitler, without ceasing to want India to be free. In "The Way Back", she enunciates a supreme principle of education, that you cannot teach what you do not know. She recalls her years as a teacher at Jesus and Mary College, and at St. Stephen's. In *The Narrow Corridor*, Muriel lays down her own philosophical faith.

In the four educational essays, she emphasises that a true teacher is his students' equal in the common pursuit of knowledge ("The Uncommon Task"). Public schools must broaden their horizons and welcome children from all sections of society ("What To Do with Public Schools").

In "Teaching and Learning the Humanities in Indian Colleges", she maintains that the supreme virtue in a teacher is "to penetrate to the heart of what the wise dead taught and what the living grope to say". In the last essay "Education and Traditional Values", Muriel Wasi affirms that the tradition of reverence in our country must be replaced by the critical habit in the process of education.



MURIEL WASI (1912-1995) was educated at the University of Madras, where she took a Triple First Class and topped the Presidency lists for the year 1933, and at the University of Oxford. She taught at Maharani's College, Bangalore (University of Mysore). During the Second World War, she served in the Directorates of Military Public Relations and Public Liaison in South India, Assam and Delhi, editing three war journals. In 1952 she joined the Union Ministry of Education, edited *The Education Quarterly* for several years and served here and on deputation to the National Council of Educational Research and Training for 18 years. She worked as Consultant in Area Studies to the US Office of Education twice: once on behalf of the Government of India in New York in 1964-65, and later in a personal capacity in Indiana in 1971-72. After her retirement from the Government of India in 1970 as Deputy Educational Adviser, Muriel Wasi taught English at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, and the Jesus and Mary College, New Delhi (on whose Governing Board she served) for three and a half, and five years respectively. She continued to teach, write and broadcast regularly.

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## Foreword

I had the pleasure of meeting Muriel Wasi on a few occasions, but greatly regret not knowing her better and not encountering her insightful writings. I feel compensated for this neglect by the book, *The Narrow Corridor*, assembled by her daughter Jehanara Wasi, which offers a rare insight into the mind of a remarkable thinker, writer and educationist.

The book brings together eight pieces of autobiographical writings and four essays on crucial aspects of educational theory and practice by the late Muriel Wasi.

The autobiographical writings reveal a sensitive soul and a probing, independent mind.

'Fugue' is a confession of the mystery of the sea of which Muriel first became fully conscious at Colva in Goa as a child. The sense of 'controlled passion' which the sea symbolised remained for her the mark of all depth and greatness in life and literature.

'The Dining Room' is a poignant evocation of her parents' desire to make of their home, which breathed the air of books and learning, "a country of our own", a sovereignty with no boundaries. The sense of such a sovereignty of scholarship and literature beyond nationalism stayed with her throughout her life.

'Through the Wilderness' and 'The Golden Years' are a vivid portrait of Muriel's stepping out of this 'country of her own' into the domain of the ordinary, and her discovery of the extraordinary within it.

Standing on Magdalen Bridge in Oxford, she discovers the purity of the life of reason, the pursuit of truth with rigour and patience which characterised education at Oxford, without the crutches of the irrational and mystical. The conviction was to shape her thinking and writing later as an educationist and consultant in the Ministry of Education in independent India.

In 'On My Own' and 'A Spanish Proverb' we find Muriel Wasi immersed as a writer in the war effort against Hitler, without ceasing to want India to be free. She bears witness, as did her parents, to the moral leadership of Gandhi which was to transform history, despite the trauma of Partition; and to the integrity and wisdom of independent India's early leaders, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Sardar Patel, C. Rajagopalachari, and others.

In 'The Way Back' she enunciates a supreme principle of education, that you cannot teach what you do not know, and recalls her years as a teacher at Jesus and Mary College and St. Stephen's College with admiration for these institutions.

In the concluding autobiographical piece, 'The Narrow Corridor', which is also the title of this book, Muriel Wasi lays down what can be called her philosophical faith: that we control very little of our life and circumstances. But alongside our lives there runs "a narrow corridor" which we can traverse with integrity and joy, without recourse to religion or atheism; in imitation, perhaps, of the sea's "controlled passion".

The world is a bridge to cross over, not to build on, she says.

In the four educational essays, she emphasises that the true teacher, like Socrates, is his pupil's equal in the common pursuit of knowledge ('The Uncommon Task').

Public Schools nurture excellence and do not deserve abolition. But they must cast their net wider in our country, and welcome children from all sections of society ('What To Do with Public Schools').

In 'Teaching and Learning the Humanities' she maintains that the supreme virtue in a teacher is "continued dissatisfaction with himself, with his knowledge, his ability to communicate it, to penetrate to the heart of what the wise dead taught and what the living grope to say".

In the last educational essay, 'Education and Traditional Values', Muriel Wasi states with no ambiguity that the tradition of reverence in our country must be replaced by the critical habit in the process of education.

Somewhere at the heart of a crucial thought in this book, Muriel asks herself what she would choose, if she had to choose between scholarship and motherhood. 'Motherhood' is her unhesitating answer.

The care with which Jehanara Wasi (her daughter) has selected and put together the various essays in this book is a wonderful expression of gratitude for her mother's role in shaping her life of the mind, and of innumerable others.

I am grateful to Jehanara for letting me read the manuscript of *The Narrow Corridor* and asking me to write a Foreword for it.

April 2005

Ramchandra Gandhi

# 1

## *Fugue*

There is no reason that I can think of why some moments in a long life should be remembered; others, and the majority forgotten with the ease with which the automatic daily experience is sloughed off, even seemingly by the nagging subconscious. Once upon a time, either when we were very young or adolescent, middle-aged or on the way to old age, these things happened. They were not just thought, though the thoughts that followed them were, for the same unaccountable reason, memorable. They were events, associated frequently with un-loved persons or institutions or just things that made a far-reaching impact on a mind, not abnormally observant but possibly more sensitive than it was willing to concede. These events, experiences, flash again and again upon the inward eye. Often they do not make the bliss of solitude. Quite the reverse. They come back dragging with them the burden of pain long felt but unwillingly recognised; are sometimes accompanied by a crackling streak of anger; but most often, with a proportion and completeness of understanding that one has to be old to achieve.

Perhaps the first, and among the strongest, of them is my first full consciousness of the sea at Colva in Goa. I was six years old, always accompanied by Annie, a fervent Tamil Catholic, who loved me in spite of all she suffered from me. There, with the massive impact of its roaring, rushing strength, wide as the

horizon, blue, and drenched in sunlight, I saw the sea for the first time and see it again and again in my dreams and waking life, hear it with meanings that it cannot then have had for me. But all meanings, whether of beauty or sadness, have always been for me dominated by the sense of controlled power.

"Why doesn't it come up here, right up here?" I asked the simple Annie.

"God doesn't want it to," said Annie.

Hour upon hour I would sit, enthralled, looking, listening. I would sometimes play with my brother, who was two years older and so differently put together that we might not have been related at all. We did some of the usual things that children of six and eight do; built sand castles, used buckets and spades and fought over them; picked shells, exchanged them but most often, unlike my brother who finally grew to be the more contemplative of us two, I would stare hypnotised at the sea. To the ear, it was even more compelling than to the eye. Had I been blind, it would still have been the dominant external influence in memory of being.

Along the wide beach at Colva, now the resort of the world's tourists, then wholly domestic, we wandered all day except between one and four in the afternoon, when Annie and I rested indoors together, with the promise daily extracted of her, that we would stay out till nightfall on the beach. As my brother wished this, too, for reasons of his own, there was no wrangling. And shortly after four, Annie, having dressed me as if for a party, but barefoot, would hold my hand and take me out in fulfilment of her promise.

There, the morning's enchantment would grow steadily more enchanting as with sunset, the sea's growlings grew more sonorous, more turbulent, the thrash of the waves louder, stronger as the

tide came in and we withdrew foot by foot, Annie gripping my hand firmly lest I should be tempted to rush forward.

Then, out of the twilight came music such as I never expect to hear again. As our home in Karnataka was full of sophisticated classical European music, and my mother's performance on the piano was confident and accomplished, I can't think why this music that I now heard on the beach at Colva should so haunt me seventy years later. It came from a small shrine that the Goan fishermen had built for themselves not far from where we now stood. It was a white-washed shrine with a statuette within it of a white-and-blue, serenely-smiling Madonna, from whose hands hung a silver rosary. At her feet was another rosary of large wooden beads. There were, as I remember, also strings of shells at her feet. In the shrine there was always the mixed smell of fish and incense.

To me, with the sea out there embracing all I knew or wanted to know of the universe; the falling darkness, the flight of low-sweeping birds, the music that the fishermen made in Konkani of the *Lord's Prayer* came with that first revelation of beauty that is never entirely affected or superseded. They sang in chorus in tenor and deep bass voices, luxuriating in their religion and their music as if this were, the central emotion of their precarious lives. They sang and sang, their *Ave Marias*, their *Sancta Marias*, rising and falling with the falling and rising sound of the waves.

"We must go home now," said Annie when this ended.

"No", said I and "No" said my brother and poor Annie, when in a minority, succumbed and we stayed.

My brother and I were (and perhaps are) as different as brother and sister can be. He was always more private, more touched by religion than I.

And when I said boastfully of the shrine:

"I've been in and seen it inside," he was furious.

"Then d..don't do it again," he stuttered angrily, flinging away from me and Annie, a continent on his own, full of a sort of Mosaic fury.

"Why not? We're Catholics too."

"Because, you l... little fool it's theirs to open or close, to use or smash. It's n..nothing to do with you or me. It's a shrine, it's holy, because it's their prayer-house and because they've built it for themselves, not for us, though ... we ... are ... Catholics, too."

He contrived to pour all the scorn of his small square body into the words.

I don't suppose I understood what he meant, and always on my side when I was attacked, Annie said sternly:

"Don't speak roughly to your sister."

But that night for the first time I began to sense the meaning of trespass.

We walked, two separate continents of feeling, and as we stumped home through the wet sea sand, morality thrust its head into the universe of sea and darkness and singing. It was now all more complex than I had found it that morning. But the next day the sea, blue, wide and powerful, would be there, always itself, to assert the constancy of natural things.

Over the stretch of decades, the sea has come back to me again and again as the dominant symbol of controlled power. Perhaps Annie was right after all, I never could tell about the essence or source of this control. To the sea I would always go back for life, for spirit and energy, perhaps even for the will to survive. Once, when about fifty, I was gravely ill and the doctors, having examined and consulted, and diagnosed conventionally,

suddenly turned to me in a body, and the woman among them, asked:

"What is it that you would most like to do? *Like* to do, mind, not *have* to do?"

Not caring much whether I lived or not, too weary and too sick to care, I heard myself say: "See the sea, sit down by the sea."

"Then that's what you'll do," said the woman-doctor triumphantly. "You'll be a new woman in a month."

A new woman? No, very much the same woman I had always been, but it all came back as I sat by the sea, this time at Gopalpur-on-sea in Orissa. Some part of the early wonder and mystery had perhaps suffered. Some part of the poetry was gone. My brother and I were now, more than ever, two distinct continents of experience: I an educationist, he an engineer; I committed to literature, he to technology. And he was in any case far away from us, Annie was dead.

Instead, I had my small daughter with me and she did not feel about the sea as I did... why should she?... Though she followed me dutifully back and forth from hotel to beach.

There were compensations. At the hotel, living in it by choice, was a lyrical French woman, recently widowed, who mourned the loss of her Indian husband. She loved the sea and all the poetry of inherited Catholicism. And she and I went at night and sat on the seashore. The fishermen did not sing – there was a different sort of music. We agreed, Madame C. and I, that we heard great chords sound. And we re-enacted for each other and for ourselves the experience which for both of us, would inform our lives to the end of time.



## 2

*The Dining Room*

As my mother huddled over Annie's lifeless body under the mango tree in the big garden, I knew that what I had learnt to dread had happened. Annie was dead. My mother, a doctor, should have known this, but she continued in a shrill, voice to cry out: "Annie, Annie, speak to me." Annie was past speaking to anybody. I saw the small heap of twisted body in the bedraggled brown sari and fled madly from it, to the carriage that was to take me to school. All day I lived cocooned in horror and the silence of loss.

What would children do if the misery of pain and horror lasted? For they have no skill at reducing pain or turning it away. Something, someone from outside must step in to remove it, and I suppose someone did, because for the next eight years, on and off, all my conscious life was lived in my father's dining room and round his dining table.

They used to say of us, at the convent at which we studied, that we had picked our parents very smartly, and we never doubted the wisdom of this cryptic pronouncement. They also said that we were odd, precocious, born among books, with words and phrases, information and ways of thinking that no one else in our age-group had. And perhaps we did behave differently. For those were the twenties when Gandhi, for instance, was a new phenomenon and in Anglo-Indian schools — and the convent

was precisely this — Gandhi was an object not of wonder but of fun. Any girl taller and stronger than her age, who had a troop of followers, immediately earned for herself the sobriquet of "Gandhi-and-his-followers," and the sneers and snide remarks all round suggested a funny, rather than a dangerous man, a caricature rather than a bogey. But memories of the talk at my father's dining table protected me from becoming a part of this atmosphere. I was not a heroine and did not stick my neck out, but as I look back, I am glad that I never joined in the derisive laughter or jeered, never even thought that the British Government was the custodian of all sanity and authority, or that Gandhi was a joke.

Ever since Jallianwalla Bagh the political talk at the dining table had been scornful of the Government, and General Dyer had assumed in my mind just the steel-trap image of Edward Fox playing him sixty years later. For days and weeks, press comments — we took *The Hindu* of Madras — filled my parents' pronouncements, my mother always more strident in criticism than my father. But both were eloquent with a passionate liberal disapproval. They were not revolutionaries, merely commentators, but within the sanctum of their dining room, their children would be left in no doubt of what they really thought. So when my brother reported that a teacher when told that I was 'on Gandhi's side', had said I must be 'mad', which caused me to burst into tears, my father responded kindly but firmly with: "Don't let them mislead you. Some day you will be glad that you were alone." And my mother, with the same quiet dignity, said: "These children will see history made."

These were the moments that I remember when talk turned to conversation, and even the resplendent beauty of my father's



dining room with its cabinets of glass and silver, faded, to yield to the presence of a new and important idea. It was this that erased the memory of Annie. I had begun to think.

When people insist today that a school to be effective must function within an academic building and that the common-sensical way of herding children into schools for twelve years or so, is the best way to equip them to live their lives in the world, I wonder whether this commonplace of education is really unsailable. As schools went, the convent did its job. It instructed; it praised; it punished; it rewarded; it trained for examinations; it took good results. And, I suppose, one emerged with a certain stamp of respectability, but no one in my school ever taught me to think for myself. That was what I remember beginning to do in my father's dining room and round his dining table.

My father was considered for his times a knowledgeable doctor. He was said to be informed, conscientious, reliable and kind. He was enormously popular: I never met any one who did not like and respect him. And yet, I think that only his family knew him for the person that he actually was. Not spectacular but wise, sane, unfailingly understanding. No one but we knew that he had consciously created a climate for thought and growth, for scholarship and wisdom for the six people in the world who mattered most to him. He could not have done this without my mother's richer and stronger intellect, her high accomplishment, her many-sided gifts and her ambition to make a country of her own within India. For this country of hers was too cosmopolitan to be representatively Indian. Between them, with his wisdom and her sophisticated talents, with something approximating to inspiration in language, literature, music, art... all supported by books whichever way you looked... they made the sort of place

that rendered a school unnecessary. Or, perhaps I ought to say, that they set the pace for thinking and learning — the school filled in the gaps. How lucky we were!

It has taken me fifty years to grasp what we had, that most Indian children of our generation lacked, and what only a minute percentage of Indian children have today. Neither parent had ever been trained to teach, but both were for the times exceptionally well-educated. Both were doctors, and therefore scientific of background. My mother was an instinctive and practised linguist. She acquired languages with ease, fluency and for life. She loved working at academic things, and so would spend all her spare time studying. Our library at home put the school library to shame. But it was not just books "coldly ranged on shelves" that made the texture of our lives. It was the combination of life and books that made those early years so fruitful. Doctors live close to life, new and old. Death was never far from us, we often heard of it, were exposed to it and, without morbid detail, began to understand that it was as important to die well as to live well.

Parents today spend generously on their children's education, but they do not give their children time, and this is why the educated family is in constant danger of splitting. My busy father made the time to be with us at meals, chiefly at dinner. The food was excellent. He drank claret and port wine and loved fine cheeses, and we were introduced early to the world's dairy of cheeses. The dining table made a picture with its mounds of saffron-coloured coconut rice, with black cinnamon sticks proclaiming a special flavour; with fish in butter; with cheese toast done to a golden finish; with desserts of exquisite fastidiousness and no doubt high calories. We ate and drank and lived well but never thought that this was all part of a design for learning as for living. There was

apparently no virtue in asceticism — neither parent sought to be deprived — but you paid for what you ate and drank, and discussions of stocks and shares, the elements of banking, made it clear while you ate and drank, that money must be wisely handled to make this substructure of the good life possible. Society did not owe you a living. You went out and got it for yourself.

There were other discussions round the dining table that did more. There was the Gandhi incident that has been related, but there were also wide-ranging stories about Darwin and Pasteur; of the Franco-Prussian war in which my eldest sister, always given to supporting losing and lost causes, talked of French heroism in paying to the last franc what Bismarck demanded in order to vacate French soil. There was talk about what Geometry implied, the mystery of working backwards, the method of *reductio ad absurdum*. And, too, as my mother explained to keep the cultural balance, what it took in years and discipline to cultivate an operatic voice fit for the *Scala*. When we rose from the dining table, it was less a meal than an episode that had ended. And when inevitably, my father died, and the older children went their several ways, the girls to make homes of their own in distant cities, the boys to universities at home and abroad, the dining room with its gleaming table and silver-and-glass environment remained enshrined in at least one memory. As the shadows lengthened and the lights went out one by one, the central core stood impregnable against time and age as the heart of a country that we had made our own.

## 3

*Through the Wilderness*

It is hard to know whether we grow more swiftly in periods of concentrated sadness or in those of extravagant achievement. Sometimes it seems to me that the one makes the other possible. There is no enduring growth without pain; no effective maturity without a prelude of conscious desolation.

As the lights went out one by one when my father died, and the big house that he had made with my mother into a country of our own was shrouded in deepening shadows, I began to know at first hand the sadness of isolation. The walls of our house had always been too high for my taste. I would have liked to know everyone but knew only those who were approved. Only the brave approached my mother; the sick came to consult my father. Now that he was dead, the walls seemed to shoot up high as an unnaturally prolonged mourning engulfed us. From being an image of high accomplishment and unbounded energy, my mother became a monument of sorrow draped in black. Just how long this lasted I do not now remember but to me it then seemed like years, and the only positive long-term benefit that accrued to me from it was a passionate addiction to reading and books.

The big house had always been full of books. Whichever way you turned, there they were. There was my father's medical

library of impressive tomes, but those were shut away from us in a room adjoining his surgery.

There were, however, enticing books on literature and art, politics and history in the revolving bookcase in the sitting-room; books in the long hall, that had been converted into the children's study; books in the bedrooms, in cupboards of all kinds. Even the corridors were stuffed with books. Birthdays and Christmas added to the treasury of annuals and books-in-series for all age-groups from five to twenty years. They were serious and they were funny; they were romantic and they were downright; they were adventurous and they were tidy and static; they were classics, semi-classics and books for today. I doubt whether any family of six children between the ages of six and twenty can ever have had a more liberal and varied selection to suit their moods and temperaments. And so I read in those shadowed years, as if driven by a fury. I read and read and read, without direction, without restriction. Barely was one book closed than another had automatically opened and been read hungrily. As I look back today on those inarticulate years — for I had no close associates outside college and, thanks to my own oddities, I had few friends there — I know why I have always since preferred to be with books than with people: through my years in the wilderness they supplied me with my surrogate life.

Through that time in which the big house, deserted by its many voices, grew more silent every week, my mother and I lived side by side but forty years apart. She was fifty-six; I, sixteen. And quite suddenly I had left sixteen behind, for the books had supplied the experience that life seemed bent on denying me. I seemed to grow overnight, not in judgement for living — for

whom did I meet? — but in learning. Academically the silence, the shadows and the books bore fruit because I began to find all work easy, not to have to exert myself in the least to top classes, impress lecturers and examiners, break records and in consequence of all this, became, if that were possible, more unpopular than ever before.

Few children choose to be disliked, but when younger I had not much minded being different and apart. Now it was important to be liked and I often wondered in my naivete what I had done to be so actively disliked. It got indeed to be so bad that when I overheard boys in my first co-educational college refer to me with evident distaste as 'the Prodigy', I knew that my feminine teenage fate was sealed and that I was powerless to change it.

The staff of this college was anxious as far as respectability then allowed (these were the early thirties) to stage mixed doubles in tennis. I was no worse at tennis than most girls, but the conversation that I had overheard made it abundantly clear that, my academic prowess notwithstanding, no one was eager to claim me for a partner.

"You take the Prodigy, old boy. You can have her all to yourself. I'll have Maya, thanks very much."

"What on earth would I do with the Prodigy?"

"That's up to you, old man."

"What would anyone do with her, if it came to that?"

"Break records, for instance."

Everyone laughed.

"Not on the tennis court, for God's sake."

"It's the luck of the game, dear man."

The young men of the thirties were not more cruel or cynical than young men then or now in any part of the world. They

were possibly less serious than good students are today or I could hardly have beaten them so consistently and so, for them ignominiously. But they wanted a girl in her teens to be a teenager, not a tome of learning. The bluestocking was the associate most to be avoided if you were to be a 'lad'. Maya, sweet, pretty, charming and natural, filled their adolescent dreams.

As I think of it today I wonder why we were so trivial, so immersed in our own insignificant local concerns. For those were the days of the Salt March and the consequent imprisonment of millions of *satyagrahis*. The newspapers shook with the vibrations of Dandi, and Gandhi was already a national leader of intuitive authority. His word carried; his writ ran. Yet we in this provincial city of Karnataka, responded all too mildly to the beginnings of a movement that was to culminate in 1947.

It underscores for me today the dangers of *a country of your own*. For you can live this private life so intensely, so neurotically, that the great world outside is heard but not listened to, seen but not noticed to be central to the lives of those it is going ultimately to shape.

I went home to the big house steeped in its shadows. In due course, my mother and I dined silently in the dining room, no longer a symbol of knowledge, no longer an episode to be remembered. That done, we retreated to what my mother called "the drawing-room," a stiff-backed room with elegant furniture including two pianos, but lifeless despite its old rose curtains that looked out through French windows onto a garden, now half-wilderness. Here we read, or at least my mother did.

The years succeeding my father's death had made her scholarship even more pronounced. She read the Greeks over and over again and could, if pressed, have simplified their

philosophy for the uninitiated. I pretended to read too, but the afternoon's dialogue recorded and re-recorded itself on my mind, shutting out the printed word. I turned the pages of an unread book mechanically, wondering how I had ever mistaken a book for a living thing. It was late. Outside, all traffic had ceased. The big house was very still. My mother appeared to be absorbed in her reading. My misery was complete. It was the old, old story: cleverness got a girl nowhere.

At eleven my mother closed her book with the snap that suggested completeness. She stood up, tall and somehow more commanding than usual.

The funereal quality disappeared for a moment as she straightened her shoulders adjusted her rings. When she spoke, it was in a deep voice, but without her accustomed sternness.

"D'you know, my dear," she said casually for her, and as if I were not much younger than herself, "d'you know, it is not in the least important to be popular."

I looked up amazed. So she had been aware of something deeply wrong all the time, had guessed at the cause of my silence more correctly than I would have thought possible for her or anyone outside the college.

She moved, always rather theatrically it seemed to me even then, towards the old rose curtains at the French windows and drew one of them.

"And now," she said, pausing in the act of drawing the other, "we are both tired and need sleep. Tomorrow is always another day."

She drew the second curtain to meet the first and came towards me. As I looked up, I observed that her usually stern face was extraordinarily tender. Perhaps she had decided at last that the living mattered at least as much as the dead.

## 4

*The Golden Years*

*T*he Englishwoman whom my mother regarded as her oldest friend was a firm believer in palmistry. As she peered through a magnifying glass at the lines of my right hand (she followed Cheiro), she said: "There's nothing straightforward about this hand. You'll have ups and downs all the way."

The lines seemed clear enough to me, and I had little faith in either the lady's judgement or in palmistry, but she proved right though without ever correcting my scepticism about the necessary connection between a palm and a destiny. Since for some years, the tendency had been 'down', I reckoned cynically that it was time for an 'up'. There had in fact been errors of judgement both on my part and on my mother's; a broken engagement; disenchantment with everyone and everything. I now had a craving for some outlet that would get me away from it all.

Perhaps the palmist was right for the outlet came in the shape, first, of a woman-friend many years my senior, who thought that twenty was much too early to give up, and who suggested to my mother that a university abroad might solve many problems. She had answers to all objections and in time I watched my mother weaken and finally grow to be convinced that for me to go out and study further might, for the time being, be the truest wisdom. And that was how, with a prelude composed of the strangest and

most unlooked-for circumstances, I got the opportunity of my life. I went up to Oxford.

When other Indians, men and women, meet many years after they have come down from Oxford, without any comparable trace of what the years spent there did for me, I feel that I must have been exceptionally lucky. For those for me were the golden years. I remember, after a stirring tutorial with a philosophy don, standing for a moment on Magdalen Bridge and feeling that life had just begun. Had I ever known failure? It no longer seemed so. Had there ever been misery, long shadows, pain, misunderstanding? There was no place for them now. Before me lay the land and here the chance to explore it. I felt free and light. Nothing was ever to hold me back again, neither India's nor my family's traditions, neither belief nor inhibition. The sense of being suddenly winged and free to fly, where and how I would, was intoxicating. Daedalus could hardly have felt freer. This would always be the moment of consciousness to which I would return later when disappointed, saddened, crushed. If the sensation on Magdalen Bridge had been real, it could possibly be recaptured; there was no need ever to feel permanently beaten.

My three years at Oxford from 1937 to 1940 confirmed that moment again, again and yet again. On reflection today, I had not really had an unhappy youth for there had been compensations all the way up to, and beyond the age of 21. But the sense of pervading joy, of unbounded exhilaration, of a mind stretching out, unrestrained to discover one knew not what with, beside me, wise hands, scholarly heads, gentle teachers with innately good manners and, with in addition, a whole world of young people bent on both enjoyment and work — and they blended with remarkable ease — this, was new and unbelievable.

It had never fallen within my realm of possibility, but it was, indeed, here at last.

There are other forms of happiness such as falling in love that soar momentarily into a sort of ecstasy. There is the joy of giving birth to a child. This, too, is without clear parallel. But there is no happiness quite like the sustained happiness of the three golden years that taught me what was possible in mind and emotion for a mere human being. As I try now to probe the anatomy of this happiness, I do not of course re-live the sheer rapture of its first discovery, but I do remember strands of what made the composite weave of happiness.

There was, first, the atmosphere of pure scholarship that placed this above all other things, above success, wealth, beauty. When others outside Oxford have talked of truth, or of Truth, I have felt vaguely embarrassed and like echoing Pilate. There, up at Oxford, it was self-explanatory. Intellectual integrity was all. This, you pursued, as if nothing else mattered. Even time played second fiddle. You might take all your life to move from the letter 'P' to the letter 'Q' of any discipline's alphabet, and your time was well spent; whereas to spend the same time on getting places materially was second-rate. The men and women who emerged from the portals of my Oxford frequently touched giddy heights of worldly success, but the best of them never valued this above their personal integrity. Oxford was *in* the world but not *of* it. No one of any value ever assessed a human being by his class, his ancestry, his possessions. He was assessed solely on the quality of his mind-in-action. "A most estimable person," was a phrase I frequently heard, and when I finally met the subject of this tribute, found him plain, poor, and socially negligible.

We often disputed the degree and evidence of free will that Man enjoyed, but we seemed not to doubt our own capacity as individuals to shape our own lives. My first encounter with Dr. S. was an eye-opener on what Oxford expected in initiative. She required an essay on John Stuart Mill's concept of liberty for the individual. Had such a demand been made of me in India, I would have been assisted with a lecture, a list of books and elaborate guidelines, and would have been warmly commended for appealing for such assistance. Dr. S. had other ideas. When I said in my most earnest voice: "But where shall I look for my material?" an assinine enough question when Mill's text lay before me, she fairly barked: "Go and find out."

After that I decided to use a library without seeking human intervention. When the subjects or tutorials grew more abstruse, my tutors — among them D.W. Brogan and G.D.H. Cole — did give me plentiful references but always left me to decide which of them I would consult. Dr. S. required not a great stretch of reading, but thinking in and round a single important statement. Be it said to her lasting credit that when, having written three drafts, I finally produced the essay she required, she unbent so far as to growl: "Good... in parts very good indeed! You're no fool." And for the next hour we pulled the essay to pieces and put it together again. I began to understand how to think clearly and consecutively, how to present a thesis and attempt to prove it; how to criticise the commentators; above all, never to mistake an epigram for an argument. No one in any Indian college had ever taught me or required me to do these things. Indeed, I had never had a real tutorial, only a string of lectures lifted in excerpt out of books within my reach, that I could have read myself and summarised. Here every good tutor added something of his or

her own to the books you were required to analyse and criticise. If Oxford had taught me nothing but how to read, how to study and how to learn for myself, this would have been reason enough for lasting gratitude.

But of course she did much more. If my father had had a design for learning within a design for living, Oxford went further with a design for living within a design for learning. Having broken the shackles of a too-great reverence for authority in the printed word, and freed the mind to make its own judgements, she proceeded to caution young radicals to know a text before setting out to destroy it. She taught respect where respect was due, but this had nothing to do with the author's great age or status, majority-views that supported him or his traditional authority. Everything must be examined on its own intrinsic merits. These merits must be related naturally to the period in which the writer lived and wrote, but were not to be coloured by his charm, his fluency or his persuasiveness. So, judgement of books and people was formed but within the limits of academic life.

And there was a richness of personality here that I had never found within an Indian university. The Principal of my College, Grace Haddow, had a gallantry that I came to associate with Englishwomen of intellect, training and professional standing. They may be found in other societies but Miss Haddow's brand of gallantry still seems to me distinctively English. There was nothing she would not do to help those of any nation, race or religion, who had proved their ability. When she died, all too soon and suddenly in my third year, I mourned the death of a friend.

In terms of people, no three years could have been more crowded. Within the limits of what Oxford admitted, there was

variety of temperament, talent, taste, attitude and ambition. You tended to associate with people of your own College or those in the same School, but not always. Sometimes precisely the contrast of discipline stimulated friendship. I knew several anthropologists though I have never wished to study anthropology. But most of your lasting friends were those you met by chance, through a common friend, at a party, through the timely intervention of a sympathetic don.

Indian students met fairly regularly at the Oxford Majlis that was invariably 'subversive' and that never lost the opportunity to rail against their British imperial hosts. Generally great tolerance was shown towards this. I've often heard English undergraduates say: "Old man, I detest your views, but I love the way you put them —" to which Voltaire might have accorded his proverbial smile of reason.

Extra-curricular activities were a sort of extension that rounded off tutorials, lectures, seminars. Political clubs, academic societies, college debating and dramatic societies, the nearly-professional OUDS, film societies, all within "the radius" supplied a richness of student life unknown in India in the thirties.

Commitment, rather than faith, was what the Oxford of my times taught. These were the "Hitler years" that included the rape of Austria, "Munich" and all that, and the first year of the Second World War. G.D.H. Cole was often quoted as saying that "Man is either a political animal or a stupid political animal." All my friends were political animals, and though we frequently disagreed, our common ethical idiom or code cut across differences of belief and unbelief, race, national conflict, and so brought us out on the same side. As the persecuted intellectual fled from Nazi-occupied Europe, he tended to come Oxford-wards, and



we therefore had the advantage of great minds presiding at our seminars with courage and an independence of mind that exemplified what the University stood for in those deeply troubled times. There were great Englishmen who came up to lecture to crowded halls — Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore. One grew merely by listening to them: they had the courage to think for themselves and to act in accordance with their thinking. Churchill, who was not a product of Oxford, still spoke for it when he said that courage was the greatest of human attributes: it *guaranteed* all the rest. This, we believed.

They tell me now that there were so many things that Oxford omitted to do for us. Perhaps. They say it has changed and, for the worse. I doubt it. We had much to learn certainly when we came down, and we learnt it the hard way, for life is larger than academic life. But from Oxford I drew my colours for life, and I have had no reason these last forty-seven years ever to lower them.

## 5

### *On My Own*

Perhaps the most practical lesson I learnt when up at Oxford was to take sole responsibility for my own decisions. This meant being able to earn a living and so being able to dispense with maintenance from elsewhere. It meant, next, finding congenial work in which I could do, within reason, as I wished.

This seems simple, but nothing was really simple in the India of the forties unless you were either brave or ruthless. Back in Karnataka and teaching at a women's college I had what many people envied — a comfortable home, a social background, work of substance — what else could a young woman want? The answer is that this young woman wanted nothing more or less than the freedom to live her own life. This, she had done for three years. This, she desired to do for the rest of her life. But there were difficulties and frictions all the way. The college-teaching was stereotyped and uninspiring. The atmosphere at home was stifling. Go I must.

Presently the war, Hitler's war, furnished me with what I both wanted and needed — the opportunity to see and know India. I was strongly pro-ally; intensely anti-Nazi. Indian independence was imperative, but Hitler was clearly the worse of two enemies. I joined the Military Public Liaison Unit in Assam, travelling up through Calcutta, where I met my future husband, and saw the grotesque horrors of a famine; then up to Shillong

that served as my headquarters for a year. For that year I toured both the Surma and the Assam valleys, beautiful beyond description, with springing green rice fields, the blue, and sometimes turbulent, Brahmaputra and long stretches of countryside punctuated by a reasonably good system of roads. I was often to feel that Assam was not India — the barrier between them then seemed impassable, for the hectic pace of national life of the forties where the only relevant subject was national politics, did not penetrate the somnolence of Assam. The British often took comfort from the fact that the Assamese would take their own time and go their own way, that their triumphant regionalism must spell delay for the national movement, and that even Gandhi could not shake them out of their distinguished torpor. It seems odd today to think of Assam in these quiescent terms, but from the English hill-station complacency of Shillong, it was a not unrealistic view.

Presently my “travel line” brought me to Delhi (where my husband-to-be had gone earlier) and which, when I saw it for the first time, I knew intuitively would be my home. Mentally I said goodbye to the South. It had shaped me, taught me a reverence for scholarship and hard work, had warned me against the roughness and vulgarity that I would encounter elsewhere. But it could no longer hold me, for I had found the city (or cities, for I loved Old Delhi even more than New Delhi) in which I wanted to live the rest of my life. Truly, I was on my own.

Here, I worked till 1945, editing journals, working with Fleet Street men and learning the craft of writing. The result of my work experience so far was to divide me between Education and Journalism. I admired the first, hankered after the second; and it was not for some years that I was to see that they could be

combined to yield the new profession of Educational Journalism, that could bring the work of educationists within the reach of the common reader.

In between, I married. It was symptomatic of the new life to which I was now wholly attuned, that I never thought along traditional lines. It did not occur to me that I was doing anything unorthodox, audacious or dangerous when I married a Muslim. If I had travelled as far out of India as I had, it seemed irrational to underscore an Indian communal difference. With my marriage, always a peaceful relationship, without ecstatic heights or uncertain depths, my life was channelled into the mainstream of living in north India. I got to know Delhi and New Delhi, to luxuriate in the history of the last four Indian centuries, to travel where I had not yet been, through Agra, Lucknow, Banaras, Kanpur, to the Punjab through Amritsar; and as far as Lahore (I printed one of my journals at the Civil and Military Gazette printing press and there saw the tablet erected to the memory of Rudyard Kipling); to Dehra Dun, Mussoorie and Nainital; through central India down to Hyderabad. Later, I would travel to Orissa, Bihar, Bengal and Kashmir. The only part of India that I had not, and indeed have not seen, is Kerala. By 1947 I could claim to have seen most of the subcontinent and to have a pretty clear picture of India's countryside, her cities and people, their historied past and their problematic future. A big geographic gap in my pre-Oxford education had been more or less filled. This made the political life of the forties intelligible to me and though I did not deliberately plan it so, my private life inevitably yielded to the demands of a public life. The walls of the big house had fallen for good.

There were moments between 1942 and 1947 when it seemed that independence was just as far off as ever. Only hindsight provides the perspective that enables us to see today how pieces of the political jigsaw were falling every hour into place. Despite the fact that the 1942 Quit India Movement was crushed, with thousands in prison, the Congress was kept alive in the public memory by such people as Bhulabhai Desai. He may not have won plaudits from the nationalists of the forties, but he was an astoundingly telling speaker and Parliamentarian. I heard him speak and will not easily forget him. Ironically, too, the Civil Disobedience Movement benefited the Indian government servant, civil and military, who had been used to suppress it. He was now treated by his British masters with a courtesy unknown in the past. Sycophancy was in fact plainly in decline. Indians walked with a new confidence that would have pleased Gokhale. The once-arrogant Englishman had grown defensive and had to fight for a seat on trains from which he had once ejected Indian passengers.

1946 was a year of turmoil in Delhi. The war was over and the British seemed comically out of place. Yet few people knew how the Congress-League antagonism would finally be resolved. Jinnah was a formidable opponent. Attenborough's Jinnah diminishes the man by underscoring his weaknesses, never conceding his incorruptibility or revealing his true stature. It was of this, that Jinnah's most thoughtful critics spoke, when they alluded to him as a 'menace'. The man had, indeed, as a contemporary wit said, a "difficulty for every solution," but he would not be whittled out of existence. And the speed with which the Muslim League had grown from a protest-group to a threat of national dimensions was an object lesson for all political

students. Politics abhors a vacuum. The League had grown while Congressmen languished in prison. Jinnah's leadership was even less contested within his following, than was Gandhi's within the Congress of the forties.

The battle lines were drawn. One went nowhere without encountering political strife; talked of nothing but the immediate political future. Hatred poisoned social life. Those of us old enough to have seen the swiftness of Hitler's rise to power should have been prepared for the speed with which Jinnah emerged as a national leader comparable to Gandhi. Nevertheless one continued constantly to wonder whether his Pakistan was a conviction or just a political lever. I never could be sure.

The pre-independence fever with controversy, violence, partisanship, hatred, a testing time for all friendship, tended to dwarf a private life. I have often since asked myself whether we are really as free as we would like to think. I was then a great believer in being 'the captain of my soul', but I cannot say that I consciously desired motherhood. Yet when it was clear that I would have a child in 1947, I felt again that curious intense consciousness of life at the source that is best described a 'moment of being'. I would go south into the care of the woman-friend who had first suggested my going up to Oxford. For some years I had overworked at a desk, and had lost in physical fitness what I had gained in craftsmanship. So motherhood was not going to be easy or entirely natural. I was not aware of loving children more than the next woman. The life I had lived so far did not specially qualify me for so natural a process.

Between my departure for the south and my daughter's birth, all Hell broke loose on the Indo-Pakistan border in the west. My husband was sent down to Bombay by Sardar Patel, and here he

was mercifully spared what might have overtaken him had he remained in Delhi. The world my daughter was to enter was riven with communal hatred, but she would also usher in an era of national freedom, dedication and reconstruction. The giants of the Indian revolution were still alive; men, in addition to Gandhi, somewhat larger than life — Nehru, Patel, Azad, Pant, Rajagopalachari, Kripalani, Rajendra Prasad, capable within their human limitations of service without vanity. There was a tremendous sense of new life, stirring a resurgence of hope, a sort of delayed Spring. The wisdom of the men who made our public life between 1947 and 1950, the depth of their experience and the height of their patriotic ambition to serve, made it bliss to be alive, and to be more or less young was indeed Heaven! We felt a mild reminder of this in 1977 when the Janata Government took over, but it was not really comparable to the collective commitment that we experienced in the three years following independence. We were then truly ruled, and we trusted our rulers.

However, egotism dies hard. Through those historic years, I was still more deeply conscious of the experience of motherhood, than I was of new-born nationhood. I often returned in thought to Oxford and the gallantry of Miss Haddow. I wished for something like hers. I was determined to invoke no divine help, but, instead, to use all that science offered me to make this an experience to remember with joy. I was never more disciplined, never more responsive to good doctors. They told me, possibly to raise my morale, that I was the exception who proved the rule that intellectual women make bad maternity subjects. Labour was long and difficult, but I can look back with some satisfaction on having behaved well through it. One of my doctors told me later that the best way, indeed, the only way to know a woman

for what she really is, is to observe her through labour. It is a formidable test that few city-bred women pass at any time with distinction.

I have now spent, either as educationist or journalist, somewhat over forty-seven years of my life earning my bread. These years I consider 'professional' and to professionalism I am committed for women as for men. However, somewhere in *Our Man in Havana*, Graham Greene makes the interesting point that the private love is always more authentic and profound than the public commitment. Divided between the love of his only daughter and his possible service even to so worthy an organisation as UNESCO, the hero knows instinctively which will claim his allegiance. So has it been for me. If today a spiteful gnome should spring up to challenge me to declare *either* for professionalism *or* for motherhood, I would opt unhesitatingly for motherhood. The old adage dies hard: there is no love like a mother's. But, like so many of these sterling truths recorded in the story of woman- and man-kind, it is incomplete. Most human relationships are fraught with obligations: there are invisible debts between father and son, or daughter; between teacher and pupil; between husband and wife; brother and brother; sister and sister. Alone of all human relationships, motherhood stands triumphantly desiring no return. A normal mother loves her child from biological necessity: she deserves no praise; she needs no thanks. She has had her reward.

## 6

*A Spanish Proverb*

One of the many illusions that sustain optimists through life is that their luck may turn, that over the hill may be better things awaiting them, and that — uplifting truism! — the darkest hour precedes the dawn. There is just sufficient truth in all these adages to make them attractive and plausible and to shut out the whole truth, which is that we pay for everything we take. “Take what you want,” said God, according to an old Spanish proverb — “take what you want — and pay for it.” And this, I have observed to be true over the last fifty years.

The recognition that it is unfailingly true has come to me again and again in those moments of consciousness of which I am writing, and is now a nugget of truth not easily diminished. Indeed, it is especially when reviewing the stretch of experience that describes a working life, that the truth is painfully driven home. There are accidents, even happy accidents, but they are minor. Generally, one has the choice of various options, none altogether pleasant: one chooses; and having chosen, pays the price.

January 30, 1948, is probably a landmark in modern Indian history, but the public memory is notoriously short, and once the shock of Nathuram Godse’s act of assassination was registered and the paralysis of public reaction confirmed its reality, the collective mind longed to free itself of the burden of its

recollection and its guilt. Gandhi was dead. The slogans would now begin; the legend be told in various ways to suit various occasions. Public holidays would commemorate the birth and the death of the architect of independence, but his essential teaching and the essential spirit of the man would tend to evaporate. A whole generation born in 1948 would come to the truth of the matter as if to some old historic fact seen in impersonal and distant isolation. The politicians and the parties would use the event as a talking point, but a snappy periodical abroad, writing later when John Kennedy was assassinated, probably hit the nail on its dry head when it wrote: “You cannot stop the living from living.” And so the living went on living, no better in their lives for the man who had died to free them.

Only twice since 1948 have I felt that the echoes of Gandhi’s death will continue to reverberate through our lives... once when Martin Luther King was shot, and *Time* carried a cartoon of King with a phantom Gandhi for background, and the caption, representing Gandhi with cheerfulness still breaking out, read something like this: “Isn’t it strange, Dr. King? They think they have disposed of us once they have assassinated us.”

The second time we were collectively shaken up was in January 1983 when Attenborough’s *Gandhi* in English and Hindi came to Delhi. The echoes of the controversy surrounding this film have now died down. Scholar and cynic competed to diminish the subject and denigrate the director, but the important thing, as far as Indians are concerned, is that the event has forced us, as Gandhi’s heirs, to look afresh at ourselves. The gulf that divides him from us is not solely one of time: it is one essentially of morality. Our lives have less meaning than his because we are much, much less moral than he was. Smaller, weaker people.

And because of this we are in danger of forfeiting what he paid so high a price to win. Always, someone pays.

The contrast in significance between the large ideas of our times and the triviality of our private lives is often comic. Proportion demands that we shall see ourselves individually as the dwarfs we are, but almost inevitably from day to day, year to year and over a sweep of years, the fortunes of the individual tend to take over from world history. And we grow pathologically engrossed in our own concerns. This is not so grave a matter if we learn from the private years, but we tend to learn little and we tend to learn late.

Committed now to professional life, I had the opportunity to combine education with journalism, and to be placed in charge of the Union Ministry of Education's publications. For about seven years I worked at this and, all things considered, they were not unhappy years. Maulana Azad was Minister for Education, and was the only one of the great national leaders I met and, within limits, grew to know. He had stature and distinction and, for those who could converse with him, what Nehru described as a "luminous intellect." One did not ever get to know him very well, but one felt his presence and his integrity. Above all, one was never exposed to public attack while he lived. For he had broad shoulders, a fine sense of his Ministerial responsibility and the charge frequently made against him that he did not know the ins and outs of his Ministry, was a half-truth that his enemies, and those who did not know him, exploited and indulged. As I look back at the meetings of the Central Advisory Board of Education that I attended those first seven years, where the Minister was ably assisted by thinking men such as Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar, Humayun Kabir and K.G. Saiyidain, I am again

reminded of how sharply we have fallen. The record of discussion between 1952 and 1958 does not perhaps do full justice to its weightiness, to the respectful and valuable participation of Vice-Chancellors and State Ministers of Education, but there is sufficient to show that the senior-most officers had thought hard and worked hard while preparing agenda along intellectual lines, so as to provoke a handsome response and to justify the special quality of a professional Ministry on the lines envisaged before Independence by Sir John Sargent. There was then a ferment in education at a level that made one proud to belong. There is nothing comparable any longer. The pedestrian quality that has taken over through a succession of people too small to be compared with Azad, is one more proof that we have moved steadily downward since 1947. Nothing but a resurgent educated leadership can hope to restore what was once worth recording.

Life within the bureaucracy is neither the quiet berth nor the bed of thorns that contrasting critics make it seem. In that long run that describes institutions, it tends to be dull rather than oppressive. It demands a certain acceptance of responsibility for oneself and others, below which one falls at one's own risk. It enhances daily competence while destroying creativity. It takes some time to realise all this, and the daily tone and colour of bureaucratic life make the immediate story more memorable than the long-term climate. But presently one has ceased to be oneself and is not immediately recognisable as the hopeful ebullient creature one was at entry. The constant compromises that are called for, the lies along the way told at all levels, the wasteful procedures, the long, long pointless discussions, the strong sense of hierarchical status, the clerical mentality that underlies and often overrides important ideas — all these work towards

eliminating personality, erasing differences and reducing men and women, pleasant and individual enough in their private lives, to official automata. It is more important not to be found out when doing wrong, than to make a point of doing right. In nothing did we grow to resemble our erstwhile masters, the British, more closely than in this: individuality yielded to designation.

In the eighteen years of my official life, I made exactly two friends. Both of them cared more about the form of educational-cum-secretarial life than I did — I was always an outsider. To both, survival in this scheme of things was more important than it ever was for me. I had come to the bureaucracy older, more set, more ironical and less willing to be manipulated or impressed than these two either by the rule of men or of governments. Truthfully, I feared no one, though I respected Maulana Azad. I learnt from Humayun Kabir, from K.G. Saiyidain and, through the years in which I served with him in the National Council of Educational Research and Training, from L.S. Chandrakant. I learnt nothing from anyone else.

The officer is a little screw in a very large machine. Perhaps some of us decline to be absorbed into this machine and for this we pay. We remain ourselves; we are never integrated. We make what contribution we have to make, but are never representative. Eccentricity is tolerated in India, even within the bureaucracy, provided it does not get in people's way. Once it does, it marks one down as 'unbalanced' or 'rigid'. (I was constantly exhorted to be 'more flexible'.) One had in effect refused to wear the uniform of the clerk. One had declined to accept the mentality, part-sycophant, part-bully of the Section Officer, who is the ultimate triumph as he is the ultimate horror, of the bureaucracy. And of course secretarial staff is for the most part, far worse than advisory (in this case, educational) staff. For conformity is of the essence of a secretariat and the professional educationist does not

easily conform. My two friends often said that what I had given them that was of inestimable and permanent value in my eighteen years of service was the truth (of which they became convinced in time) that 'Life is larger than the Ministry of Education'. In short, proportion. I was sure of this when I entered the Ministry in 1952. I was surer than ever of it when I retired from it, without regret, in 1970.

In 1987 I know, looking back — and this is the only way one does know — that *for me*, it was a mistake ever to have entered government service. If I had my life again, I never would. Eighteen years is a large slice of any life. To feel sure today that consistent hard work through that period, with a scrupulousness in serving the public that I have known in few others, were entirely fruitless to benefit this public, is to know that the work need not really have been done at all. I can now think of several things I could have done as a private citizen that would have amounted to more during the years in which I had so much vitality and goodwill to press into constructive service. But the tragedy of discovering this is that it is always too late to re-trace one's steps. Knowledge comes, indeed, but only when vitality has ebbed. Mind and body travel in opposite directions.

If this seems like complaining, let me say at once that all the advertised benefits of official service became mine: an ordered life, security, pension, provident fund, gratuity, specified leave, inexpensive lodging, official transport, official prestige, national and international travel. The price I paid — my thirty pieces of silver — was confirmed mediocrity. This, I need not have accepted, if I had resisted the blandishments of order, security *et al.* *I became mediocre because I consciously chose the way of mediocrity.* So no one is to blame except myself. "Take what you want," said God. "Take what you want — and pay for it."



## 7

*The Way Back*

Not till I retired from the Ministry of Education did I really begin to understand and enjoy education. Many years ago, I had started work as a teacher in a constituent college of the University of Mysore and had worked for two years but had not felt at home. Except for the stint of a term at my old school immediately after taking a Bachelor's degree of the Madras University, I had not taught earlier. The experience had, however, stimulated an interest in the superior child — I had met two in that term — but had left me all too vague about the actual business of teaching. Superior children are rare anywhere and do not, in any case, require a teacher. Then, while still serving in the Ministry of Education, I had the chance over and over again to “observe” teaching in secondary schools all over India, at Evening Colleges in Calcutta, at Rural Institutes near Agra and in Bengal, and at the Regional Colleges of Education at Ajmer and Mysore. I now had a glimmering of just how important teaching at every level was, but I did not yet feel impelled to teach myself — not, that is, till I was deputed by the Government of India to the State Department of Education in New York, where I was required to introduce teaching about South Asia, specifically India, into the school system of the State.

This was the first major professional challenge that I had experienced and the atmosphere of New York — ambitious, dy-

namic, demanding but generous to all proven ability — was exactly what I needed to trigger the unused vitality of my years at the Ministry. I seemed suddenly to have a hundred women at work within me as I travelled and taught, analysed and discussed learning on behalf of the State Department of Education, from area to area, from school to elementary, junior high, senior high school, and demonstrated teaching for large groups of teachers — often two hundred strong — all critical, go-ahead but immensely fair-minded. The discoveries I made were my own, for I had not been handicapped by a training in any College of Education in India.

I went to New York to teach and stayed to learn. The cross-fertilisation of ideas was immensely fruitful and immensely rewarding. Every teacher or group of teachers I met treated me as a colleague and friend. We would compare notes, exchange professional experience with a complete sense of the same commitment. We communicated to perfection. Not only did I discover that I could write professional reports of some excellence that won plaudits from my employer, the US Office of Education (not to mention the New York Department of Education), but also that I could write for, and to, teachers all over the State with the assurance that I would be understood and my theories promptly tried out. I used radio and television effectively and produced for Channel 16 (the Education Channel) a series of ten programmes entitled *Legends of India: The Values of a Civilisation* that were used, and are still used in the secondary schools of the State. These served as the nucleus of my book *Legends of India* that were later published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training translated into many Indian languages and proved in English to be a bestseller both in the US and in Australia.

But most important, I learnt to see teaching as a learning process for myself and for those of all ages whom I taught. I resolved to go back to India to apply what I had learnt.

While I worked in NCERT it was possible to apply some of this experience, but I knew that I would have to cease to be an official before I could effectively apply what I had learnt. So, having retired from the Government of India in 1970, I accepted an invitation, this time in a personal capacity from the US Office of Education and the Indiana Consortium, to do in the State of Indiana what I had done earlier in New York. Here, I would work, in addition to schools and school teachers, with colleges and universities. It was different from New York, that is educationally and otherwise *sui generis*; but it was also challenging. I did not feel that I had grown older but I was certainly wiser and now keen to work in smaller units to promote what I understood of learning and teaching.

On my return to India in 1972, the newly established Jesus and Mary College, New Delhi, invited me to serve in its Department of English. So much was I now in charge of my own life, unimpeded by official steel-frames, that I said I would work part-time only. This proviso the College accepted, and I found increasingly that in close harmony and cooperation with its second Principal, Sister Aquinas, I had great scope for experiment and warm encouragement to innovate. I was able to develop the Library Seminar for hand-picked Honours students and to initiate an Advanced Course in English Literature to be attended on a voluntary basis. Both proved useful. There were frictions within the department but they were minor. My relations with both the administration and the students were excellent and the work flourished.

Presently the Principal of St. Stephen's College, Mr. Rajpal, invited me to join his Department of English and again I agreed to work part-time, and did this for over three years with great happiness and a sense of achievement.

In 1977 I withdrew from institutional teaching altogether, but continued to accept students, Indian and foreign, who came to me at my apartment to study the English language and its literature. So far there have been about one hundred students from countries of Europe, West Asia, Africa, the Far-East and South-East Asia, and Indians from all over India. If I have taught them how to use the English language for the varied purposes for which they have required it, they have amply repaid me by teaching me how they live in far-flung parts of the world. My friends have multiplied. The years between my students and myself seem not to have mattered. I am 77: my students have ranged from children of 9 to men and women of over 50. The professionals have included demographers, haematologists, business executives, educationists, administrators, secretaries to specialists of all kinds and diplomats. The students have sometimes been examinees for the English General Certificate of Education at 'O' or 'A' level; the Indian Senior School Certificate; the English and History Honours of the Delhi University and the Master's Course in Business Administration, Delhi. There have also been those who have wanted to speak, read and write English for their own satisfaction and, with few exceptions, they have been rewarding associates.

Between 1972 and 1990, I have been my own mistress — have taught, written and broadcast as the spirit moved me; have served on governing boards of schools and colleges; have participated in conferences at school and college level; have

presided over and participated in seminars; and served with working groups — all this to enlarge my professional experience. The work has taken me from Lucknow, Dehradun, Simla and Jaipur, to Bombay, Madras and Bangalore.

Throughout I have felt and known that if what you are seeking is to know and to do effectively, you have a much better chance of realising your educational expectations in a micro-, than in a macro-situation. The worm's eye view of education that you have while working in a school or college, at a conference of school or college teachers, librarians and administrators, is enormously more useful in improving learning and teaching, than the bird's eye view that was vouchsafed to you while presiding over the destinies of such professionals from the remote citadel of the Ministry of Education. To change the metaphor, better, much better, grow your own vegetables, fresh and whole, in a small garden that you control, than issue directives, flats, grants of money to vegetable growers at a distance of hundreds of miles with whom you cannot communicate on terms of professional equality. The give-and-take of professional experience that I first knew in New York in 1964-65, I have felt again and again progressively more valuable as it has grown out of our own native soil, as I have travelled representing no one but myself in short- and long-term assignments. In this service have I truly freedom found. And, too, professional friendships of enduring strength and comfort. And at last the harvest from the seed sown earlier in educational journalism has stood ready for reaping. My books *The Romance of Teaching* and *Legends of India* have sold out, been reprinted, or appeared in new editions. I have participated in international educational symposia; have entered into textbook and supplementary material markets; and have felt free to write

with unorthodox assurance on the business of school and college teaching and learning.

Good teaching is a composite of many things — knowledge, insight, the ability to communicate and simplify. Above all, the capacity to adjust oneself to learners of all ages and aptitudes, cultures and requirements. The best results are invariably obtained where there is human sympathy between teacher and learner, when learning becomes a collaborative process. The size of a learning group and its homogeneity are important elements in this experience but I have known good teachers directly affect large classrooms of college students. This, I saw in the Evening Colleges of Calcutta in the early sixties. Many of these students were earner-learners, mature, determined and obsessed with the need to study. Several of them were acutely poor. I was strongly impressed by the passion for education that dominated the lives of young women who could afford not more than two saris. The lecturer spoke to two hundred students at a time and there was "pin-drop" silence as he spoke.

Throughout India, and at all levels, I have observed with sustained pleasure and optimism the anxiety of many students to know and to learn. Yet teaching in general is not good. Undoubtedly the enormous quantitative expansion that has taken place since 1947 has complicated the teaching situation, and classroom teaching is not easy except in a small percentage of private establishments that obstinately control their enrolment and the size of each section of a class. But by itself numbers would not explain why our teaching is generally so poor. As I have now taught in several countries and have "observed" teaching at all levels, I know good teachers instinctively. They are people with a certain quality of integrity that appears to be rare in India. These people

know in their bones that you cannot teach what you do not know. The truth is as simple as that. They know that no good teacher can ever be a bad student, and that learning and teaching necessarily go hand-in-hand in the same human being for as long as he or she teaches. Tagore said this in his inspired writing on education, that all too few people have read or inwardly digested. "A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its own flame." Bad teachers abound in India because they have done their learning casually and superficially, and because they are unwilling to go on exerting themselves through a long professional life, learning as they teach. The ability to simplify difficult concepts for others flows directly from your own thorough understanding of such concepts. Your ability to communicate flows immediately from your conscious knowledge of a subject. There is no better test, of whether you really know something, than your ability to teach it to the satisfaction of your students. If you cannot teach it, you do not know it.

Once we accept this premise, we will stop placing the fallacious emphasis that our training colleges do on methodology. As if the most ingenious methodology could ever enable you to teach what you do not really understand, of history or the physical sciences, mathematics or language, literature or economics!

All teachers should be required at every level of school and college teaching to demonstrate their teaching publicly to inter-school and inter-collegiate colleagues at least once a year. Only the brave will accept such a challenge; the rest will shrink from it. And with reason. For what fake ever wishes to proclaim his fraudulence?

## 8

*The Narrow Corridor*

Once one has touched the upper limit of man's natural span on earth, the biblical three score and ten, the time has come for reckoning, for a summing-up. Looking back is a revelation: so many things have happened that were never looked for, so many things have not happened that were expected. The most salutary truth to pass on to those still halfway down the road, is that life is of its essence unexpected, and the best that we can do is to be prepared for what may happen.

This means in effect that we control only a limited part of our lives. We do not control our birth or the circumstances thereof; we do not choose our parents, we do not choose our immediate relations, brothers and sisters. We do not control our inheritance, but after the passing of some years, we can possibly promote or, within limits, undo it. Heredity is a constant that all of us have to deal with. There may be in it reason for satisfaction or for distress. Either way it exists; it is a fact.

Our earliest conditioning is also beyond our control. In those formative years in which the Jesuits claim that we are made — three to seven — we do not shape our lives. They are moulded for us. But for the stronger, more clear-sighted and more obstinate of us, the first moment of being is not quite accidental. The child who selects such a moment to be preserved in memory, consciously enriches his life. The earlier this consciousness occurs,

and the more deeply it is felt, the more individual its owner is likely to be. For the act of selection at six, say, or eight, argues the need and the will to choose, and so to be an individual. At Colva by the sea when I was six, I had my first moment of being.

Moments of being in adolescence and early youth depend in part on the lines... the places and times... in which a life has fallen, but within those limits, the man, the woman, chooses what will be forgotten, what remembered and stacked up to form his or her mature identity. There is in this process a tantalising fluidity: we often think we are moulded for life, but we never are permanently moulded. The process of choosing or being shaped goes on from day to day through the years, through the decades. Each memorable experience alters our angle of vision. It takes decades to formulate a belief and to claim an attitude that fits our identity. At seventy, we feel the need to qualify most elements of a credo. A shifting kaleidoscope is a more suitable symbol of these changing beliefs than a static pillar that proclaims conviction in this or that way of thought or life. Yet, within this constant need to shift the position of the eye-tube, there is something like a body of empirical truths that have the force of a composite guide to living. None of them was inherited. They flow from my own experience and are, therefore, not a creed for anyone but myself. They may well, however, supply those in constant doubt of which way to go, with a hypothetical map of a country basically foreign and unknown to all of us. They may supply women with a working formula for difficult times.

From the wealth of experience that I have had in many places through many years, I know one or two things at most for certain. One is that the world is truly a bridge: we are wise to pass over it; unwise to build upon it. This is not an inherited belief,

for wise as my parents were in many things, the stronger and the more deeply intellectual of them, my mother, held strongly by property, material property. Despite her high artistic accomplishment, she was in so many ways an Indian Forsyte, with a horror of poverty that she believed must necessarily be demoralising; a deeply ingrained respect for stability and tangible wealth; for planning for the morrow, for family continuity; and the habit of interpreting the good life in terms of wealth and well-being, in that order. She would not, indeed, have sacrificed her principles of honesty and honour to wealth and well-being, but she contrived for the best part of her life to have the best of both worlds. She died in her hundredth year, full of honours, in 1972. She was entirely of the *haute bourgeoisie*. She did not take unnecessary chances; she believed in material solidity and clan solidarity. She believed in class and breeding.

To these things, I do not subscribe, or at least not with anything like her emphasis. I believe in economic independence and so have earned my bread and saved to ensure my independence. I do not believe at all in the need to be rich. I have never had any ambition to be rich. I do not believe in the need constantly, beyond a sane and healthy limit, to increase and multiply one's worldly possessions. I do not believe in the purchase and ownership of land, or the building of houses on it. I believe that one should live as travellers do, with light physical baggage, always ready to be "uprooted," to take the next train or plane symbolically to the next uncertain destination.

I have never met Malcolm Muggeridge and have only a qualified admiration for his clever-clever writing, but I share with him wholly the sensation (that I have had ever since I was on my own) of being a passenger on earth; of merely passing through;

of being about to go on somewhere else. Where, I do not know, and have as yet met no one who can illuminate the darkness for me. But this I do know: it is folly to imagine that the world-of-things-on-earth can be of permanent or paramount importance to any human being. Every day I meet men and women, chiefly women, who plan for plenty on earth. These "Marthas" drive me mad. They are thing-centred. Often the things they go in for — Limoges crockery and Chippendale chairs — are beautiful, but they are not content with seeing beautiful things, they must *possess* them. This appears to be central to *their* moments of being. They are often kindly people, but I do not like them. I do not wish to meet them, to live in the houses that they have planned for years and then built, or even to sit at their dining tables. I sometimes find it hard to be civil to them — we differ so much in our attitudes to living. Me, they regard almost as a Bedouin, and I sometimes think that had the lines of my life fallen in or near a desert, this life might have suited me well.

My second firm belief flows from the first. To spend all one's life ambitiously working at getting on in order to wield power over others, to enjoy high status, to be the centre of admiration and envy, is to have thrown away the only life we have. It is sound to pursue excellence: to do well what you do. It is not criminal or even misguided to wish to live well within reason. Epicures are frequently very agreeable, if somewhat short-sighted, people. Their appetites are easily satisfied. They are not generally schemers. The occasional epicure of whom I have made a friend, has never betrayed me, as those professing the simple life have sometimes done. The epicure merely pitches his expectations for himself rather low. But those who plan all their lives to live in splendour (and I know so-called artists and artist-managers who

do this) though they are surrounded by stark poverty, clearly lack proportion and sensibility. A lifestyle is indicative of the sort of person one essentially is. One's living room is always revealing. The houses of the materially pretentious either have no books at all or have rows of elaborately-bound but unused volumes or coffee-table books to establish their affluence. Proportion is a virtue, and in India proportion means declining to be ostentatious.

The tolerance that I have learnt with the years is not, and never will be, with me the product of initial instinct. I love and hate attitudes to living and dying so strongly that I am unwilling to be "comprehensive" or flexible with, for instance, literate people who do not read because "I really haven't the time," ... that is what the idle rich Indian housewife is given to saying, or because "reading hurts my eyes," a feminine excuse made by a lower age-bracket. I suppose it is intolerant to insist that everyone shall be as addicted to reading as I am, for I could not live without books, though I could very easily live without most people, but the fact is that I can make friends only of those who are instinctive and habitual readers.

I ought to say that this intolerance does not extend to the illiterate or the neo-literate who are victims of others' negligence. My intolerance touches only those who have had the chance to read, and have not taken it.

A step further brings me to those who shirk the business of dealing with ideas, and would rather spend their lives arranging things. I believe with my most impressive Greek teacher that 'the unexamined life is not worth living.' People who prefer doing to thinking, make good executives and administrators, but are by nature wary of ideas, theories and thought-processes. They are generally non-readers, would rather pick up their scraps of

information by listening than reading; when they do read, read pictorial magazines; shrink at the mere mention of the Great Russians (I refer to Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Turgenev and Pushkin) and deliberately keep conversation at meals and elsewhere "happy, healthy and low-brow." These are not really despicable people; they are merely mindless.

There are people I have known who are clever, conscientious, dedicated, with a strong sense of professional and civic obligation, who have been subjected by an evil chance to traumatic physical experiences. They have, for instance, had a blind, or deformed or retarded child. The experience may have refined their already fine natures, but such disasters do nothing to confirm my faith in a benevolent superintending force, for there never were more deserving people than those who have so suffered. I do not believe that everything happens for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and that so much acute human unhappiness (for which man is not manifestly responsible) always or often improves human beings. Sorrow frequently depresses, and embitters for life. Why should it always be considered purifying or elevating?

If, therefore, I can help the living to escape or recover from such misery, I will do what I can in a practical way and within my resources. For the living have always mattered to me more than the dead. I often think of the dead, and especially those who, it seems to me, were cheated of life, died without knowing the happiness or fulfilment that they deserved. But I do not visit cemeteries with or without flowers, do not attend funerals or raise lapidary monuments to the dead. I suspect, indeed, that the dead do not stand in need of our pity or sympathy. I also suspect that the prolongation of rituals year after year in homage to the dead, are comforts calculated to soothe the living. It seems to me

that the only effective way for the living to honour the dead is to promote in action the things the dead stood for.

Much as I would have liked to be self-sufficient, I know that no mere human being ever is. We need friends. Sometimes we need just the assurance that over the years they have continued to be our friends. I attach the strongest importance to the development and sustenance of friendship. I have few friends, but I never forget that we chose one another consciously and apparently without regret, because we have remained friends for thirty-five, thirty, twenty and fifteen years. We do not always correspond with each other but, when necessary, we do. And a gap of ten years' silence makes no difference to the quality of our friendship. We have picked up the threads of a conversation that we left off fifteen years ago, as if these were fifteen hours. Friendship implies an unwritten contract freely entered into; relations are an inherited duty. Goodwill is necessary in both cases, but friendship has always seemed to me to demand more in thought and action. It has earned its permanence.

"Still are your pleasant voices, your nightingales awake,  
For Death he taketh all away, but them he cannot take."

And so to Death. I was once flying late at night out of New York into England. I drowsed through the relatively short night flight and woke suddenly to the most enthralling vision — the white clouds parted to reveal a brilliant sunlit sky at dawn, and down below stretched the velvet green of English countryside, an image of perennial Spring. It was a glimpse of what our grandmothers told us Heaven was like. I resolved then that I would spend the rest of my life finding out what the whole mystery of human life was about. Where we come from. Where



we go. Why and for what and how we find ourselves on earth. But as I had to go on earning my living, I have not pursued my quest with the single-mindedness that it demands.

In all of us there is a narrow corridor that runs alongside the wider area of our chaotic public lives, and that contains our most private selves. No one but the man or woman to whom it belongs knows what happens in it. Indeed, there is little movement in it, just an all pervasive consciousness of being. As we continue to learn and to know till we draw that proverbial last breath, we grow more insistently aware that logic, reason and commonsense are not the only ways to knowledge. There are other ways — intuition, sensibility and, I believe, sometimes at moments of high intensity extra-sensory perception — an as yet unexplored frontier that may yield startling results.

For years now I have seen my life less in time or achievement, than in special moments of being within a narrow corridor of a crowded moving train. The populated space contains people of all kinds, who frequently interrupt the growth of what I conceive to be the essential spiritual identity of a private man or woman. Perhaps this is why the truly thoughtful of both sexes retire to a planned contemplative life: they do not wish to be interrupted or disturbed. I have not actually wished to hang a 'Do Not Disturb' sign upon my door, but I have increasingly organised my life so that I meet no one, and no one meets me except by appointment. This has given me privacy and my life, order. I have consciously retreated from the persistent interruptions of my public life. For it seems to me that it is only by a constant retreat into one's narrow corridor that one achieves an understanding of what life is about, for life does not seem to me to be either purposeless or absurd.

Within this corridor I have looked back to that night by the sea when I was six years old and began to understand the implication of trespass and privacy, of natural power and discipline, and the overwhelming sense of a universe, so much larger than our understanding can take in either steadily or whole. I have picked out moments of being at my father's dining table; a moment of revelation when my mother — the biggest abiding influence in my life — showed me that popularity did not matter; the three golden years at Oxford, packed with moments to remember and the supreme moment of exaltation on Magdalen Bridge; then, moments in my professional life in which I discovered that I could write, that I could teach, and in my personal life, love and be loved; that I could make a life different from the lives of my forefathers. Perhaps the highest moment of being was that of conscious motherhood, for this has taken charge of other moments in a life uninterruptedly active in body and mind. As the music that I continuously hear diminishes from its highest pitch, the sounding moments recur, more modulated, gentler, but still insistent. I hear them as I now write, for with age I live more and more within the corridor, avoiding gatherings of people, convivial parties, noisy celebrations, patriotic public events. All insight comes with work and I work without pause. I go to seminars; listen in to music, radio-plays; participate in informed discussion. Indeed, I go wherever I can learn, though my most valued moments are those spent alone reading, studying, asking questions.

The Book has been for me the symbol of knowledge, of insight, of sensibility. No other medium has ever really competed with it, though I have often preferred to hear than to see; preferred music and radio to cinema or TV; poetry-reading to

painting and exhibitions; unillustrated, to illustrated books. The book and the Book of Life are not for me divided sources. Literature has seemed to me so often to be at par with life that the distinction that clever people make between them remains for me unimportant. And today the book is as often about death as it is about life. For nothing so sharpens the appetite for life as the proximity of death.

After seventy, most conscious thought in this narrow corridor is about death, the great unknown that people fear and that all of us are curious to know more about. If one is sick unto death of an incurable illness, it is not hard to choose to die, but ordinarily, life is sweet. Each morning I say to myself: "I am glad to be alive" and I add mentally that I deeply regret the one suicide (a woman) that I might have prevented by taking greater thought. I now go out of my way once I have identified a potential suicide to prevent a similar occurrence. For there is alas! no substitute for life. Yet death cannot be far away and must be faced as life has been faced, not necessarily with stoic fortitude, but with a certain unspoken gallantry. The image of Miss Haddow persists, her shoulders being consciously straightened, her parchmentlike skin creasing into a smile when she must have been in great pain, must have known she was dying.

I said that logic and reason are not enough. Something akin to mysticism surrounds my 'felt' conviction that I am merely "passing through," I am not rooted in earth. And I do not think, to change the metaphor, that my stub of candle will be snuffed out when I have crossed the bridge and come to the final signpost. My moments of being suggest a continuation, but I know no more of the 'why' of this than anyone else. I read the saints, but they do not help me though their long preparation for death

should have made them experts. The holiness of a Catholic priest I know, moves me. When we meet I say to myself: "He is so near God," a strange inconsistency for an agnostic! But he speaks a language I no longer remember. I lost it with the voices of my innocence long before I reached Magdalen Bridge at Oxford. Though his presence comforts me, his words signify little. Agnosticism, the ailment I suffer from, deserves one cheer only: it is honest, but it is also deeply frustrating. It is religious schizophrenia. You believe momentarily because you cannot disbelieve the evidence of earth and sun, sea and stars. Then you look at the horrors of creation, when the hand of the Potter shook, and you do not believe. And there you live oscillating between belief and disbelief. You would like to believe, but truth eludes you because, says my Catholic priest, you have thrust grace aside. Perhaps. But not consciously. I look and look for meaning in why I am here at all, and sometimes feel that I am looking for the wrong things, asking the wrong questions. The easy way out is Ben Adham's, perhaps: "I pray thee then/Write me as one that loves his fellowmen"... Or, Philip Melancthon's more forceful "there is nothing divine on earth beside humanity."

But do I love my fellowmen?

In small doses, and only those of any nationality with whom it is, in my meaning of the word, "profitable" to communicate. I find the European, the educated European that is, as distinct from the Englishman or the American, more profitable to discuss life with, because he speaks my sort of language and because he combines intellectual curiosity with a sense of the past and a built-in daily automatic sensitivity to literature and the fine arts, a composite that makes for me an educated woman or man. By the same token, however, I dislike in the modern European, his

existential way of life in matters relating to personal relations, his habit of travelling light when he ought (in my view) to be more concerned with human suffering and deprivation. I dislike his attitudes to sex and frequently to women. I dislike his easy-going hedonism and his scorn for the unpropertied of the earth.

And what of my fellowmen and women in India?

I am at home with them even when I do not pretend wholly to understand them. But I do not take the initiative in knowing them better, for I am weary of disenchantment and opposed to the irrational element, that is such an integral part of an Indian way of life even today. So I fail as a Christian, for I do not love my neighbour as myself. I offer him goodwill instead of love; civility and non-interference instead of comradeship and help.

With age (so I am told) I have mellowed, am less activated by anger and indignation. All that this means is that my anger and my indignation are less manifest, less frequently and less strongly expressed. But they continue to abide within me, and are to me among the few, the very few, virtues that I possess. I always have been angry with injustice and the unjust, with fraudulence and frauds, with hypocrisy and hypocrites, with complacency and the complacent, with resigned ignorance and the amiable philistine, with indolence and the lazy and shiftless. I continue to be indignant with treachery, with betrayal, with the habitual lie in word or deed that I run into almost every day.

If ever I ask myself who among us is worthy of Heaven, my answer remains: "Very few." For it is my belief that though few human beings in their universal vulnerability really deserve Hell, only those deserve Heaven who make it for themselves. Christ was right when he spoke more than once of Heaven being within us. It is as well to understand that this has no relation to a time,

past or future; that it is being made here and now with every conscious moment of being within that narrow corridor that describes for me the deepest core of a human life.

## *The Uncommon Task*

### SELECTIONS FROM MURIEL WASI'S OTHER WORKS

Nor all teachers are heroes or martyrs. Nor need it be the ambition of every teacher to dazzle men. There have been quiet, anonymous teachers who have done very excellent work through the ages without startling anyone. Theirs is 'toil unsevered from tranquillity,' like the work done by Nature in drawing from out of the seed sown in earth, the plants and flowers and trees that make the beauty of Indian landscape.

The quality that we demand of teachers, that has existed in all good teachers since Socrates, is the quality of single-mindedness. A man may be quiet, undramatic and single-minded. He may also be sensational and single-minded. We require of him only that he shall be single-minded. The rest is a matter of personality, of which we will speak later.

It did not fall to many teachers to drink, like Socrates, the cup of hemlock after he had spoken immortal words to judges smaller than himself. Nor has it fallen to all teachers to make the sacrifices, that have come down to us in the history of Bronson Alcott. But there are stories that will show you how great teachers in many parts of the world have lived their lives in accordance

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\* Reproduced from *Romance of Teaching* by Muriel Wasi, National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi, 1964.

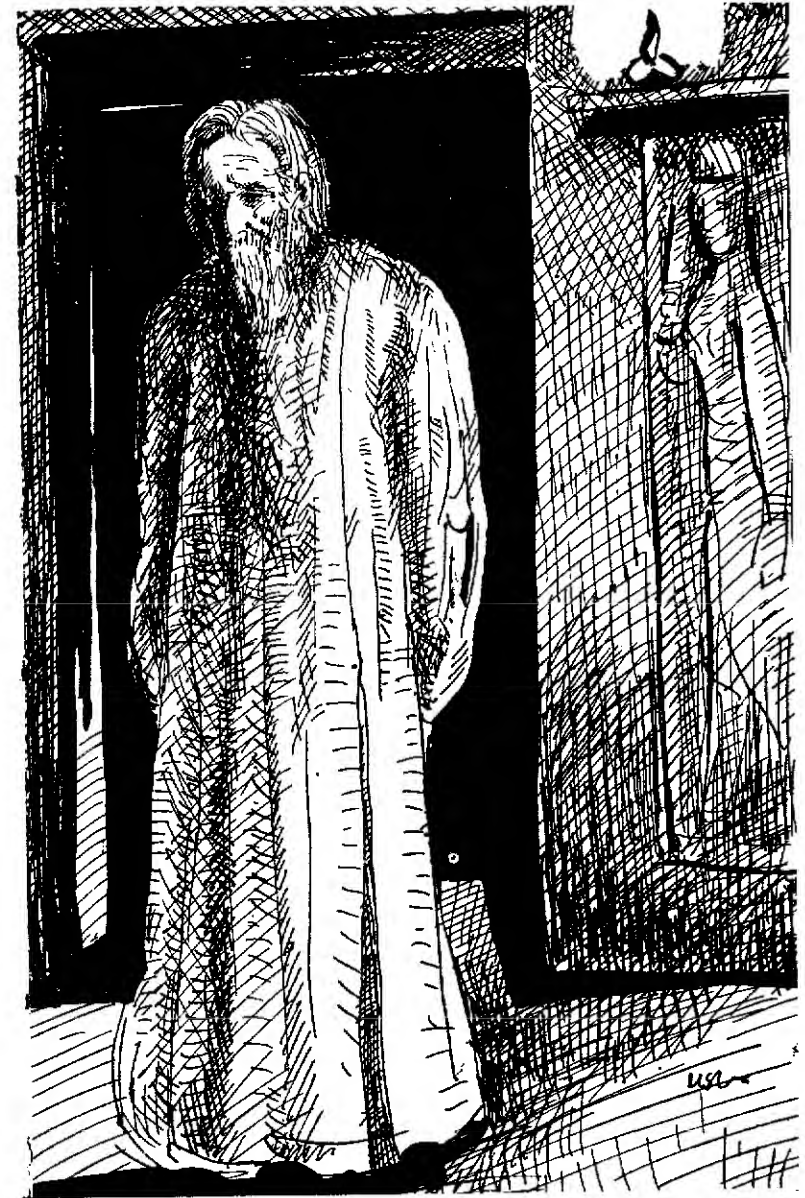
with a code of conduct and thought that makes boastful men humble.

When we talk of teachers who have stirred the waters of learning for their own country and the world, we think in India at once of Rabindranath Tagore, whose birth centenary we have recently celebrated. Tagore was many great things: a writer, a poet, a painter, a philosopher. But he will be remembered also as a great and original teacher who saw that teaching was an uncommon task.

For him every child had a personality of its own. The purpose of education, he felt, was not merely to impart knowledge; it was to make every individual the biggest and fullest kind of person that he could be. Like Rousseau, the French thinker, Tagore insisted that the child should be given the completest freedom in which to develop. He stressed the importance of natural life, and urged that children should always be in contact with nature. They should feel free, bodily and mentally. Like Freud, the Austrian thinker, he felt that the subconscious mind of the child was more active than his conscious intelligence, and therefore that a good teacher was a teacher who knew how the mind of children worked, and that the mind was both a thinking and a feeling instrument.

You probably know that Tagore's work as a teacher is now immortalised and enshrined in the institutions of Santiniketan and Visvabharati. These are symbols of an original teacher who gave our people back the self-confidence that they had been in danger of losing. Perhaps the best summary of what Tagore thought is in his own words:

A teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself.  
A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to



*Tagore: "A teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself."*

burn its own flame. The teacher who has come to the end of his subject, who has no living traffic with his knowledge, but merely repeats his lesson to his students can only load their minds. He cannot quicken them. Truth not only must inform, but also must inspire. If the inspiration dies out, and the information only accumulates, then truth loses its infinity. The greater part of our learning in the schools has been waste, because for most of our teachers their subjects are like dead specimens of once living things, with which they have a learned acquaintance, but no communication of life and love.

You may have heard of Lady Jane Grey, the scholarly and noble young English girl who, in an intrigue for succession to the throne of England, lost her life in the early sixteenth century. Writing of her and her celebrated teachers, Ascham and Aylmer, Macaulay, who was a vivid historian, said:

Those fair pupils of Ascham and Aylmer who compared, over their embroidery, the styles of Socrates and Lysias, and who, while the horns were sounding and the dogs in full cry, sat in the lonely oriel, with eyes riveted to that immortal page which tell how meekly and bravely the first great martyr of intellectual liberty took the cup from his weeping gaoler...

Do you see how often Socrates appears in the romance of teaching? We can never, it seems, shut him out. He is like an insistent echo, like a presiding spirit. And that is important, because though apparently a failure when he drank his cup of hemlock, he shines today through the centuries with the splendour of abiding triumph.

Let us go back for a minute to Roger Ascham about whom Macaulay wrote so vividly. One day Roger Ascham went to see his pupil, Lady Jane Grey, to thank her for her kindness to him and to bid her goodbye. Her parents, the Duke and Duchess,

were out hunting with all the gentlemen and gentlewomen of their household. But Ascham found Lady Jane in her room reading Plato, the Greek philosopher, in Greek with as much delight seemingly, as if she were listening to a merry tale.

Ascham bade her good morning and then, watching her with admiration, asked why she was not out hunting in the park with the rest of the household. Somewhat to his surprise and to ours today, she said: "Alas poor people! They do not know what they miss."

Ascham, who knew that Lady Jane meant what she said, pressed the point further. How was it, he asked, that she was so devoted to study? To this, the surprising young woman replied: "I will tell you a strange story. God did me a great service when he sent me very stern parents and a very gentle schoolmaster. For, when I am in the presence of my parents, whatever I do must be done to perfection, if I am not to be severely punished. But when I am with my schoolmaster Mr. Aylmer, who teaches me so gently, so pleasantly, and with so much charm, time does not exist. When they come to call me away from him, I begin to weep, for everything except learning is for me full of grief and trouble and fear. But my book is pure pleasure, and to read and to go on reading is for me to know true joy."

As Ascham listened to her, he felt deeply moved. To his dying day, he would remember this, for not only was Lady Jane Grey a great lady, she was also the great pupil of a great teacher.

Nor were these all. Three hundred years ago, there lived in Czechoslovakia a teacher called Comenius who taught that there are no boundaries to knowledge, that human beings the world over must be knit in the adventure of discovery, that is learning. How important that contribution is you will realise when you

find that the nations of the world have sometimes tried to make a monopoly of their advances in science or other subjects. Comenius taught that knowledge is the property of all men and that all men should seek it with earnestness.

Then, there was Pestalozzi, the Swiss, who was concerned that knowledge should not remain the monopoly of a few people in the top layers of society. It should percolate through the community, he felt, so that the Good Life that Socrates sought, could be realised through community education, by poor and rich alike.

Perhaps you have heard of Froebel, the German teacher, who gave his name to a school of teacher-training for the *Kindergarten* or Garden of Children. And you may have heard, too, of Maria Montessori, the Italian teacher who opened wide the treasure-house of learning to so-called "dull" children whom she found a way to make bright.

There was Rousseau, the Frenchman, who was among the first to see that education must build upon a child's emotions — that the mind was not a thing apart. There was Freud, an Austrian, who believed that through his attitude to his pupils, the teacher holds the real key to learning and said: "Only someone who can feel his way into the minds of children can be capable of educating them, and we grown-up people, cannot understand children because we no longer understand our own childhood." Freud believed that the extent to which the teacher can win his pupils' support and affection is a measure of the success that he is likely to have as a teacher.

From America came a teacher and an educational reformer called Horace Mann, who will be remembered as long as the romance of teaching is read in the United States of America and,

perhaps, in other parts of the world. Mann was a lawyer, a legislator, and a politician, but so strongly did he feel about the need to spread education that he developed into a sort of educational missionary.

Against angry opposition on more than one front he fought his battles, and he fought them to a finish. He saw that unless the teacher was willing to renew battle when it seemed lost, the war for good education would indeed be lost. He was driven by the belief that education is the certain way to prosperity, security, happiness and salvation. He felt that he had a call to make the world a better place to live in. Though he did not invent the slogan "Open a school and close a jail," he constantly used it. We would do well to understand this.

He found that he had to make good teaching known; so he founded in 1839 the *Common School Journal*, to deal with issues as they rose and to reach teachers and members of school boards. Tirelessly he travelled over the State of Massachusetts and addressed meeting after meeting. By word of mouth or the printed word he must, he felt, make the work of the teacher known.

In those times, teachers were chosen by rather haphazard methods, and Horace Mann was convinced that unless a teacher was a dedicated and trained person, he would do children no good. So he accused towns of not examining teachers, and he accused them of being corrupt in the way that they chose their teachers. He argued and agitated that the local authority must obey the rules. Up and down the towns he went, collecting information and publishing reports. In 1837, he showed that the annual cost of teaching a child in the district schools was 3 dollars and 35 cents, that is roughly Rs.17, whereas in private schools, the cost was 12 dollars, that is about Rs. 60. Economy



is always a good argument! Horace Mann was on the side of public schools in the American sense of that term, that is of schools for everybody. He was an educational democrat.

As he worked between 1837 and 1848, his enemies grew. They attacked him because he supported public education; they attacked him because he cried out for better teachers; and they attacked him because he sought to obtain a more humane kind of discipline in schools, for he was strongly against corporal punishment.

Mann is an example of an educationist who always fought for what he believed to be the basic needs of good schooling. At the end of his regime, he could claim that he had helped to bring to the town government over which he presided, truly good schools. Into these schools he brought libraries with useful books. Also, he brought instruction in singing, drawing, and improved methods of teaching primary reading. He helped to oust corporal punishment. He urged the need for good school buildings. He helped to introduce blackboards. Above all, he helped to form teachers' institutes so as to make all teachers good, and good teachers better. He came to be a legend in many countries other than his own as a brave fighter in the cause of good teaching.

This story of fighting for teaching and teachers reminds us inevitably of Ram Mohan Roy in our own history. During the British period, no single person identified himself so closely with so many progressive movements and no one person exerted a more healthy or widespread influence. He cooperated with anyone who would bring his country into line with modern thinking. He supported movements to provide primary and secondary schools for the teaching of Bengali and English. As a protest against the treatment of women, he backed the cause of

women's education, as a century later, Karve was to support it as tenaciously as a religion.

In Calcutta, in Ram Mohan Roy's time young people thirsted for modern knowledge. Roy raised his powerful voice against conservatism, and in London he made recommendations to the British Parliament that involved a sudden and complete change in India's educational policy. He was both imaginative and brave. He took his inspiration from Europe and particularly from Britain, but he was a great *Indian* patriot. It is because he was devoted to the truth in the same way as Socrates, and because this devotion was used in the interest of India, that we still think of him as the Prophet of the Indian Renaissance.

India has sometimes been fortunate in her adopted children. One of these was a great educationist — Annie Besant — who was also a great Indian patriot. Out of a turbulent youth and young womanhood Annie Besant grew to be a great teacher and a great revolutionary. To us in India she brought a powerful mind and unbounded courage. She once said:

For nearly two and twenty years I have lived among Indians, as a foreigner but as one of themselves. "Hindu" in all save the ceremonies for which my white skin disqualifies me, living in Indian fashion, feeling with Indian feelings, one with Indians in heart, in hopes, in aspirations, in labours, for the country, knowing their weakness as well as their strength, I dare to claim an intimacy of knowledge and an identity of sentiment which qualify me for starting, as far as may be in such brief compass, the case for India a Nation.

Among other gifts that she bestowed upon the thousands in India who took her words to heart, was the gift of how to serve. This is what she said:

It is the little things of life that create habits, they continually pull us. Therefore it is vitally important that in our education we should consider what are generally looked upon as the smaller things in life and not be waiting for great opportunities... Because the little things are happening continually, you make them a habit of service till it becomes automatic, and then you will have no more trouble about it. You will find that the result of that will be rapid and palpably rapid mental and moral growth...

From America, came two great teachers at the turn of the nineteenth century and both have influenced thought in our own country: William James and John Dewey. One of the great things that James taught was that it was essential in teaching to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy. Like Annie Besant, he underlined the force of habit and taught that the more details in our daily life that we learn to do automatically, the more we set our minds free for their proper intellectual work.

John Dewey, a landmark in the romance of teaching, gave currency to the word "democracy" in education. He said democracy means living for others, the strong serving the weak, and that sharing is the essence of democracy as it is of a good society. Repeatedly, Dewey chose the family as the example of a good society. We in India have learnt much from him.

We could go on forever about single-minded, high-souled, persistent teachers from all parts of the world, from India, from countries in the Continent of Europe, from the United States of America; but with the tools that have been given you, it is now for you to read history, looking for the genuine teacher and distinguishing him from those talkative or pompous people who imagine that teaching implies a pedestal of some kind. This is a mistake. The true teacher does not talk down to people, though

he may simplify his teaching for those younger and less experienced than himself. The true teacher is his pupil's equal in the common quest for knowledge. He recognises that his is an uncommon task, but that he must go about his business as if it were a matter of everyday commonsense.

## 10

## *What To Do with Public Schools\**

Let me say right away that I have the highest admiration, within their idiom, for all that the Public Schools of India have done in the past and are possibly doing at present. They have created a style in education of their own, accepting a legacy from Britain and adapting it to Indian circumstances, in so far as this is possible. They have created, maintained and, I truly believe, sought to promote standards of excellence in education, in teaching and learning. They have honoured their precepts in practice, have to their credit a product in girls and boys of which they may be proud, for undoubtedly they have given India professional leaders in many directions. They have sought to develop character with ability, to embellish insight with experience, to teach style and add beauty to the business of living...

All this is admirable. And the roundedness of the education that you have given our boys and girls has added to the richness of our relatively barren lives in India. I have met several of the children whom your institutions have turned out in the course of my 18 years of educational administration in the Union

Ministry of Education, and more recently, I have met, taught and known them in two colleges of Delhi: St. Stephen's and the Jesus and Mary College. And I can testify to the quality of your instruction and education.

In view of all this, I consider it unwise to underestimate the Public Schools as some public figures have done or to destroy what we cannot afford to re-create. It is, however, equally unwise to overlook or to turn a deaf ear or blind eye to the criticism that is levelled against the Public Schools, for that way dessication and death lie. For my part, I want you to live and to continue to shape the lives of our children, but of *all* our children and not just a chosen few.

And so you must allow me to start by enunciating a fundamental proposition in education that will enable us to see whether there is anything after all in the public criticisms now so current about the Public Schools of India. And if so, what measure of truth they contain that we need to act upon.

First, no education at any level is good, bad or indifferent in itself and without reference to a specific environment. A form of education that may suit the State of New York is not necessarily suitable for the more backward parts of Indiana, though both New York and Indiana are States within the United States of America, the same far-flung country, with approximately the same history and the same Constitution, the same general outlook, the same language, the same idiom of living. *Schools are good or bad or indifferent only in relation to the society they serve and the times within which they educate.* The Public Schools of India will be judged good or bad or indifferent, not by their record of service in the past, not because of their special facilities in the

\* Reproduced from *Living and Learning* by Muriel Wasi, Datta Book Centre, Delhi, 1978.

present, but by their relevance to society in India and to the year 1978.

What is Indian society like in 1978? Indian society is governed by two major stereotypes, the preliminary with which we start all teaching in Indian Area Studies. The two stereotypes are the Map and the Hour Glass. The map stands for the area of the country that is more than a country. For India is a subcontinent, about equal in area to the whole of Europe less the USSR. When you recall the diversity of Europe and its divisions you should have no difficulty accounting for the diversity and the divisions of India. The hour glass stands for history and accounts for the fact that our 610 millions today live in different centuries at one and the same time. Combine these two stereotypes and you have a society that is multi-regional, multi-religious, multi-linguistic, multi-cultural and deeply stratified socially and economically. But — and this is of the utmost importance — in 1950 we, the Indian people, gave to ourselves a Constitution in which we called ourselves a Sovereign Democratic Republic. In due course we described ourselves as a democratic, socialistic, and secular Republic. *And there is no going back on this.* There is, indeed, a compulsion to go forward in reflecting these elements. The compulsion is on everyone in this country, but I think it probably weighs more heavily on educationists than on anyone else. For it is we who make the mind and personality of this country's children, and it is these children who will inherit the land.

Somewhat earlier, I referred to the differences that obtained in the States of New York and Indiana though they are both integral parts of the United States. We, like the Americans are a far-flung people, a continental people, who have to educate Tripura as well as Delhi, Assam and NEFA as well as Bombay, the heart

of Madhya Pradesh as well as the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu. So it may well be argued that a uniform standardised system and a typical school are beside the point. Here, I would agree with you. I would say that the size and diversity of India make it possible for us to have all kinds of school education at the same time, in different places, but the range will always be limited by what the whole society proposes as its distinctive features. Our society has reached the point at which it is insistently democratic, socialistic and secular.

A society such as ours has both centrifugal and centripetal tendencies. The former tend towards disintegration and have to be checked. The latter tend towards cohesion and have to be promoted. It follows, if we accept my initial axiom that schools are good only in relation to the society that they serve and times within which they educate, that schools which, by their essential character isolate their children from the mainstream of Indian life, are moving in the wrong direction for our society. Those that consciously bridge the gap between those who wield power and govern, and those who do not wield power, are relevant and good.

There is probably more discussion and more fruitful discussion about the meaning of democracy today in India than there has ever been. We are today a truly interesting country to live in, and a truly instructive country to listen to. For we understand, as we seem not to have fully understood these last 30 years, that political democracy, vital as it is, is just not enough. There is a certain minimum standard of living below which no human being should be required or permitted to live in 1978. We have not achieved this minimum standard. Though within the Constitution, several millions aged 21 and above cast their

votes to choose their leaders once in five years, they are still without the minimum that defines life in modern terms. They subsist. That they truly live, we cannot claim. And this is a fact that has to be placed daily, hourly before our privileged children in Public Schools.

More: any government that wants to survive in this country can do so only by meeting this excruciating economic challenge. It is not enough to have the political rights that we have today, though these are vitally important. Let no one delude any of us that these rights do not underlie further democratic development. When we were denied these rights during the Emergency for 20 months, we began truly to understand what freedom meant. Speaking for myself, I was acutely miserable, and I mean just that. Acutely miserable. So we have to work to keep this flame alive. But even with the rule of law, with freedom of conscience and expression, with the independence of the Judiciary secured, total freedom from censorship in press and mass media, we have still not realised the other imperative of democracy: that economic imperative, that develops logically into socialism. Liberal socialism, for there is no need, as I see it, for massive state control. The liberal socialism that obtains in Britain today, with the necessary adaptations to India, will give us the link that many of us seek between political and economic democracy.

How does all this affect the Public Schools of India? Why are they especially under attack today? When we think of economic democracy and the masses of children still out of school, the 70 per cent of illiteracy with which this society is burdened, the demands of a modern society and the need to produce wealth, we think of the unused potential that lies in illiterate children. A society that publicly enunciates its goals in the immediate future

is automatically under an obligation to demonstrate its means of increasing productivity through education and ensuring equality of opportunity, an equal claim for everyone to the means of learning and living, working and achieving the good life.

Today, the children who are able to get to Public Schools are automatically plainly ahead in this race to obtain the means of livelihood. They come of better homes, are better instructed, better set up physically, have enjoyed better facilities in study — libraries, games, total environment, not merely than the thousands at less well equipped schools — State schools all over the country — but also the millions of children as yet outside any school system, for whom we have not provided at all. Those who insist on equality of opportunity as the cornerstone of our Constitution cannot well overlook the citadels of privilege that the Public Schools still represent. We have not merely to be egalitarian, we have to demonstrate that we are. Apart from a small number of scholars financed by a government grant, children at Public Schools belong to a socio-economic elite that lives apart from the masses of India. And so the temptation exists for politicians to talk of abolishing Public Schools. You may have heard this reiterated recently to prove that the government is fundamentally egalitarian. The Public Schools, as they are, must attract this kind of utterance.

Does this mean that your entire frame of reference, your inspiration dating back to Arnold or earlier, your passion for the twin development of ability and character-and-personality, your concepts of leadership must be destroyed? No, I do not think so. At least not entirely, for revolution has seemed to me to lie less in destruction than in the swift transformation of an attitude of mind. When Public Schools respond to the cry of 'Indianise' by

introducing snippets of Indian culture — Hindi, and Indian music and Indian dancing — they are missing the essential point. The cry to “Indianise” is an appeal less to culture than to conscience. It is to demonstrate a feeling of oneness with all the people of the country.

I recall an American educationist who had lived and worked for years in India at Delhi, when I met him in 1971 in the US and shared a platform with him on education, saying: “Splendid things have happened in free India. Undoubtedly what democratisation has taken place, has taken place since Independence. But the thing I miss so profoundly in education is the general feeling of: “These — all these — are *our* children.” And of course he was right.

If we felt as strongly about *all* our children as parents feel about *their* children, and school managements feel about *their* children, this would be a very different country. It is because we seem unable to extend our allegiance from family or school or clan to the masses we see but do not know, that we are guilty of the paradox of professing economic democracy but practising the worst kind of oligarchy.

If, then, the Public Schools are not to stand abolished and not to stand out as landmarks of elitism due for demolition, what are they to do? There are at least two big aims that dominate school education anywhere. They are to develop the individual *qua* individual; and to produce good citizens. These objectives are not incompatible. In the first place, we do what the Public Schools have tried to do: we develop the many-sided child via Socrates. We teach him/her to think clearly, to think steadily, to think truly, to think deeply and we apply our thinking constantly to living. Next we have to develop social responsibility to the

point that our privileged children see their advantages and deplore the absence of these same advantages among the millions who stand without in the cold or the heat. A social conscience is necessary baggage for our times. To have and not to be aware that millions have not, is to be handicapped, to be retarded and, worst of all, to be out of step with the times. The Public Schools must understand the temper of the times. Their instruction may be modern; their attitudes are not.

How do we make educated individuals who are also educated citizens? By recognising two sorts of responsibility: the responsibility to develop oneself to the hilt of one's powers, and the responsibility to harness these powers to the public service. Here are some of the ways in which Public Schools can attune themselves to our society and the times:

First, enter today upon a scientific evaluation of your schools. Set out and re-set out your objectives in education and do not let them be too abstract or too general. Instead, frame your objectives to fit the needs of our society and our times. We can no longer set ourselves to turn out gentlemen for gentlemanly pursuits, for the era of leisure is over. We need working men and women who, by their expertise, their initiative and adaptability, their social courage and involvement, their vocational skills will be able to transform India from a medieval into a modern society. It is not enough to take comfort from being the tenth most industrialised society in the world, for this means little relative to the employment of our millions, the education for work of our 90 million or so children. We need schemes and projects for educating people in rural and urban areas for work, to ensure that they can live, instead of subsist, for the rest of their lives. The bias in favour of practicality and vocational education is

irresistible and must form part of your blueprint for improvement in 1978.

This process of evaluation, of stating and restating school objectives must be done at least once a year. The whole management and faculty, and selected children should be involved in it, so that the school becomes a community of learning-and-doing capable of influencing its neighbourhood while the children are still with you. You must develop among them social responsibility, and social responsibility is not developed in the hothouse of the school classroom. The school must go out into the closest rural neighbourhood and take learning to the most convenient rural area. This is not a matter of charity, but of obligation. It is also a way to silence your critics. Adopt a village and enable it to understand and enjoy the fruits of healthy living. Adopt a poor school and, by feeding it with your facilities, make it a good school. This has been done effectively in Tamil Nadu. Why not in the north of India?

Next, the Public Schools have claimed that they educate for leadership. But concepts of leadership have undergone a fundamental change. The Public School type of leadership is no longer highly valued. We have to eliminate altogether the concept of "class" as determining the capacity to lead. The time has come to develop a meritocracy. I mentioned earlier that schools that assist the process of integration are good, those that isolate themselves from the mainstream, bad. The Public Schools have integrated boys and girls of the same socio-economic class. This is horizontal integration. But they have done little to integrate vertically. I have spent 18 years in governmental administration and I know now, as I did not know earlier, that the upper classes of India cannot effectively administer people whom they do not

know. In our stratified society, the classes do not get to know one another till forcibly confronted. Till at least one-fourth of your enrolment is from the weaker sections of society, i.e. are merit-cum-means scholars, these classes go unrepresented in the school community. And the upper class continues to live its isolated life away from a knowledge of the under-privileged. The gulf has to be bridged, and the earlier the better. Let the number of scholarships be progressively increased. Finance them out of an Endowment Fund that ought to be established early with the assistance of rich parents. The Fund has the merit of conferring independence of government grants. Out of this reconstructed school society, a new leadership, better related to our times must emerge. Films like Shyam Benegal's *Manthan* have the right idea and should be screened over and over again and then discussed in the classroom. Till something like his intimate concern for the well-being of a village emerges, the class gap will remain, and the wrong kind of old-time leadership persist. The new leadership is without patronage. It is a *primus-inter-pares* relationship.

Thirdly, the Public Schools are instructionally good schools and since you are better placed than most schools to develop early the seeds of professionalism among boys and girls, do just this. What does it imply? Three things: (i) competence involving knowledge and skills at international level, (ii) the continuing cultivation of excellence with the 'divine discontent' that means one is never self-satisfied or complacent, (iii) the habit of translating theoretic knowledge into practice in living situations.

One of the most distressing defects of our society is the ease with which people are satisfied with their performance. Boys and girls of 17 in India are much less well-informed than their counterparts in Britain and America, must less independent, must

less determined to live their lives without the support and protection of parents and relatives. We must recover from makeshift ways, and the Public Schools can well lead such a movement in favour of early professionalism.

Fourthly, within the group of Public Schools, there is now a need to cultivate special identity for individual schools and specialisations in, for example, science, the social studies, languages and vocational skills, that will promote excellence. In this pursuit of excellence, much, much more has to be done with libraries to cultivate the reading habit, to make our children better informed about India and the world. I worry more about the inadequacies among girls than boys, because parents still regard their sons as potential householders and train them for full-time employment. But girls must be trained for work in India as seriously as boys and must recover from the superstition that marriage is a profession. It is no longer so and, in my view, should never have been.

I cannot over-emphasise the need for urgent self-scrutiny and reform. The changes that I suggest are urgent because the Public Schools have grown to be regarded as impediments to democratic reconstruction. Today, it is a case of "*Reform or revolutionise.*" No one will regret more than I, the attempt to take you over or to abolish you, but both alternatives are now on the cards. Now that you have come together in conference, look the situation clearly in the face and steal your critics' thunder by democratising yourselves, while ensuring that you remain good schools for the times. If you can take under-privileged children and make scholars and good citizens of them, you have demonstrated that you care about survival, better than volumes in praise of your services. Some part of your inheritance, the dated part, will have to be

abandoned. Study this inheritance to see what you can afford to shed, what you must keep to be true to yourselves as good schools. But come to terms with your society and the times. *For your survival is at stake.*

So far I have argued from reason for the need for swift adaptation. I now make a different appeal. I am as embarrassed as anyone by reiterated pronouncements of patriotism. Genuine patriots rarely talk about love of country, they manifest it in action. But a developing society such as ours cannot achieve its goals without some sacrifice, individual and collective. This is not an appeal to rational social justice but to something larger, the will to sacrifice for what one values. All of us are touched in diverse ways by the image of India. We have to prove this feeling. Here is a parable for our times that must speak for me:

A young man who appeared some years ago for his *viva* in the IAS/IFS examination was splendid by any measure. He was a Public School boy of some distinction, a leader at Elphinstone College and later at St. Stephen's; a Rhodes Scholar who took a Law degree when up at Christ Church, Oxford. He appeared for his written papers (IAS/IFS) and acquitted himself with distinction. At his interview he seemed almost too good to be true, and his Board very wisely decided to test his authenticity with an unexpected question. "Mr. X, what is your concept of Patriotism?" He was a thoughtful young man, and he thought his way through this one. He said: "Today, it is clearly not the flamboyant or heroic thing it once was. It is quieter, an awareness of what is necessary, a commitment. Perhaps, I would define it as '*Service without vanity.*'"

If the Public Schools of India can accept *Service Without Vanity* as their motto for the future and act in accordance with it,



they will have cut the ground from under their critics' feet. What is more, they will be acknowledged as the pace-setters of school education for this troubled country of ours.

## 11

### *Teaching and Learning the Humanities in Indian Colleges\**

The Humanities are among the oldest subjects taught in Indian colleges. Methods of teaching them, though not normally a discipline at college level, have been written on *ad nauseam*; most of us know what makes a good college in teaching and learning. And yet the entire subject is rendered complex by three factors:

- i. The state of the humanities in India today.
- ii. The state of college teaching in India today.
- iii. The special conditions and obligations of a good college, such as those represented here, in India today.

In short, it is the special circumstances of our country and times that make the subject thought-provoking.

It is customary in discussing the humanities and the social sciences to say that they have suffered academically in proportion as science and technology have prospered by the climate of modernisation and industrialisation that theoretically prevails in

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\* Reproduced from *Living and Learning* by Muriel Wasi, Datta Book Centre, Delhi, 1978. (A paper read at the Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow in 1976.)

India. The arguments are now familiar. The best students read science or technology. Those who can't, read the social studies, accent on economics for business management, and history for the Indian Administrative Service. At several good colleges, history and economics are treated as stepping stones to the all-India services. The humanities, variously defined to mean language and literature with a special bias, outside Uttar Pradesh, in favour of English language and literature, are considered by those proposing to practise journalism (a misconception that it would be as well to dispel early, since historians, political scientists, economists and scientists frequently make better journalists than students of literature...), copy-writing, teaching, publishing and writing. All these, except teaching, are relatively new professions. The market for them is limited. The rewards are moderate unless you have unusual luck. They are, for the most part, man-dominated professions in which women, many of whom wish to read the humanities because they are genuinely interested in them, are not always or even generally valued at par with men. And so the strictly utilitarian value of the humanities is at a discount. From the remarks of students, girls and boys, of literature ranging from 'His father has plenty of money; he is here for culture' to 'Oh! She'll marry the moment she takes her degree', you'd have thought that those studying the humanities were not likely to be serious scholars! One of them remarks loftily to those asking how he combines a part-time job with the study of English Literature: "I can do this because I'm just reading English : I've plenty of time."

But almost worse, because so much more harmful, is the attitude of those who teach the humanities in Indian colleges today. In the first place, I ought to say that I am confining myself

to colleges. I am not straying into University teaching, which also leaves something to be desired, but in which there are still people sufficiently well qualified and sufficiently professional of attitude towards research, teaching and that constant refreshing that is implied in both, that it is not in such bad case. College teaching-and-learning is fundamentally under-graduate teaching with tutoring at M.A. level. Few colleges make provision for lecturing at Master's level though of course a college may be a venue for such a course of lectures.

What is right and what wrong today with college teaching of the humanities in India? I would say that the *right* things are that in the better colleges of India, there is still order in the physical sense and method in dealing with a curriculum, that is still largely university-imposed, and in which teachers, partly through their own lack of initiative, have had little say. Student-material, relative to what is available in that geographic area, is good. Both girls and boys who can get into a good college with a tradition, do so partly for instruction, partly for tradition and a climate of discipline. Where some admission test is taken, large numbers of students, most of them good, are turned away, so it would be possible to argue that the student-material is good and, to this extent, that teaching has a reasonable chance of achieving results. Yet is the teaching what it should be in 1976? That really is the question. And my answer is "No," a categorical "No."

What is wrong with it? It may enter the profession with scholarship and the ability to communicate it, and this may last for a year or two. With early tenure comes an almost inevitable relaxation. The same things are said in the same way, year after year with marginal differences. Many college teachers are still not above dictating notes that they inherited from a revered

teacher, who possibly also took notes and dictated them. Librarians tell me that Faculty scarcely uses the library. Perhaps, you will say, it is given to buying its own books, and I *have* been agreeably surprised to find that there *are* some colleges in which this is in fact so. Staff is anxious to renew its knowledge in criticism and so does read (buying its own books) but it does not necessarily keep up with modern writing in various *genres*. It reads round the curriculum which is frequently, by world standards, hopelessly out-of-date and an impediment to the perfection of a modern language. Invited to serve an Advanced Course that brings the university curriculum up-to-date in progressive colleges, at least five out of every ten members of a humanities faculty will dodge speaking on writing published between 1930 and 1976. The curriculum ends often at 1930 though it describes this part of its activity as "20th Century Literature". This is distressing. I have sat on selection committees in which lecturers in English Literature have not been aware of the modern writers to whom candidates refer in the course of the discussion conducted at an admission interview. It is essential that faculty in the humanities keeps up with modern writing that ranks as literature. The comparative habit of mind is implied in all literary criticism and must be projected into writing reviewed in 1976, where the books are obtainable in India. The use of a library that can afford to keep up with book-purchase on a large scale is, therefore, absolutely essential. This is possibly conceded in good colleges as a form, but it is not practised with that automatic use that one would have a right to expect. The result is that students are frequently dismayed at finding that they know more about modern writing than their lecturers do.

There is a superstition in Indian colleges that language and literature are two distinct disciplines, and that expertise in literature implies only a knowledge of literary writing, but does not necessarily extend to a mastery of the language for either speaking or writing purposes. I constantly run into Indian graduates of literature who can be depended on to 'place' abstruse passages in prose or poetry in English and other European literatures, and have plainly treated literature as an intellectual discipline. Nevertheless, these same graduates do not write the language whose literature they have studied so diligently, either with complete correctness or with that degree of sophistication that we are entitled to expect of those who have studied literature at college level for three or four years. When it is pointed out that the language in which they discuss literary problems is imperfect, inept, dated and, in the adverse sense, 'literary' and 'academic', they smile or shrug their shoulders as if disclaiming responsibility: *Language, that's a detail*, they seem to say. But is it? There can be no expertise in literature that does not subsume a total ease and at-homeness in the corresponding language. There can be no literature that does not imply the ability to innovate in the language to which it belongs. There can be no literature for those who do not sense and master the genius of a language, so that they do not require footnotes on the subtle use of words or phrases. Myths, imagery, symbolism that play an important part in all literature, must be assumed to be self-explanatory once a first degree in literature has been taken. Not to be able to read between the lines, or to listen between the lines, is not to have found the key to literature. There are graduates in English literature and Masters, too, from Indian universities and colleges, who are employed in the all-India services, in journalism, in

publishing and in teaching, in many of whom it is patent that a knowledge of literature has been acquired without any corresponding at-homeness in language. Neither the written nor the spoken word has been mastered. Yet metaphysical discussion at some length and of some complexity is conducted with a flourish and an ostentation that eloquently overlooks the need for accuracy and mastery of the basic elements of language. Some years ago, I mean about 20 years ago, one quick measure of whether or not you were educated, was the facility with which you could use the language in which you chose to express yourself. The general decline of excellence in the use of all language is a noticeable feature of contemporary education in India, and it is a shortcoming that few educational institutions are doing anything to correct as a routine practice.

The falling off that is so manifest in communication is often considered unimportant, when compared with the defective content of college education in India. I do not think it is unimportant; it is symptomatic of the greatly enhanced slovenliness that presides over our educational lives. Till this is corrected with the automatic precision with which a child is taught how to brush his teeth the right way, we are no nearer securing the substructure of an efficient basis for learning in the humanities.

The Christian colleges of India serve a student population overwhelmingly non-Christian, and many members of their faculties are also non-Christians. It is a tribute to these colleges that non-Christian students throng their portals and are willing to use almost any connection to obtain admission to them. This argues something that will bear scrutiny. Not all Christian colleges are of the same level of excellence, but it is clearly an asset to be a member of this group, for to be comparable with it implies in

the public mind (i) a tradition of relative efficiency in teaching and learning, (ii) a tradition in discipline, (iii) an inculcation of standards of behaviour that do not ordinarily obtain elsewhere. The teacher-student relationship does both credit and continues when the student has left the college. Loyalty to such colleges is generally strong. Old Students' Associations are willingly built up and the inflow of a student population with father and grandfather affiliations is not infrequent.

In the Indian situation all this is good, but it is hedged round with dangers at the present time. For one thing, the goodness is *relative* only (I will return to this later). Where all around is in a state of decrepitude, slovenliness and makeshift, it is not so difficult to be noticed because one's standards are higher. It is never sufficiently emphasised in India that in creating and maintaining standards, we compete not with the average in India, but with the best in the world. The standard of comparison must be for 1976, and it must be international. Maintenance is expensive and more : it argues an attention to detail that goes against some basic element in our national make-up. What is new today is soiled tomorrow. Our homes reflect this deep-seated carelessness, the habit of slipshodness that every foreigner expects to see on landing at Palam. Our schools and colleges that have a public, as well as a private obligation to invite admiration and interest are dark, dusty and singularly unattractive. This may seem a triviality when compared mentally with mass poverty, starvation and indiscipline, but is in fact an important introduction to the life of a college. The Jesus and Mary College, New Delhi is a comparatively new institution in Chanakyapuri. It has a charming campus that is magnificently maintained, yet it has no more money than anyone else. The management has had its

usual share of troubles with teams of sweepers who hold it periodically up to ransom. Where the sweepers do not turn up, the nuns have themselves swept and swabbed floors till you can see yourself mirrored in them. They have an *educational* stake in cleanliness : from the daily demonstration of it, students learn how homes and institutions ought to be maintained. St. Stephen's College, Delhi, is now a hundred years old, and has an old red-brick building that recalls Keble College, Oxford, or Girton, Cambridge. It is not the shining new landscape of architecture that confronts you at JMC, but it is a delight to teach and learn in. Its day-to-day maintenance leaves nothing, *but nothing*, to be desired.

I do not ask for glass-and-chromium, for the demonstrated affluence of the affluent world that we have not got. I ask for what we *can* afford in India. It is folly to play down externals when you are seeking to cultivate taste and add to the richness of human life. *For this is the function of the humanities.* The newcomer to the college, parent or student, forms the first impression that pays dividends, on externals. Detail in maintenance is a pointer to the seriousness with which a college means to live its daily life. There is a community of interest to live in cleanliness and beauty, that is contagious, and that is an integral part of a humanistic education.

What has all this to do with the teaching of the humanities? A great deal. We have had visiting us at St. Stephen's recently, a Professor of English Poetry from Yale, who argues that it is possible to see poetry as a "survival technique." He is talking of the need to develop in education a living counterpoise to the analytic disciplines of logic, mathematics and science, to develop a technology of what he calls *respect*, to offset the technology of

*manipulation.* The latter makes practical men, engineers and craftsmen; the former makes artists, creative and intuitive spirits who supply the private world of human identity, self-knowledge, penetration to the depths of human consciousness that together justify the teaching and learning of the humanities. Whether we use the humanities in the broad sense to be convertible with the Arts of Indian universities, or in the more restricted sense of language, literature and the fine arts only, we have often to deal with the intangibles that do not yield immediate marketable results, nor, indeed, the sort of certainty that the physical sciences require. In consequence, they tend in all science-dominated modern societies to be underestimated and under-paid. A poet is generally a poor man; an engineer a prosperous one. A teacher of the arts is a comparatively poor citizen, and the avenues of employment are limited in developing societies for arts students.

As the economic rewards of science and technology are larger than the humanities, so the investment in them is larger. It seems to me that the last refuge of the humanities and humanitarianism (for they are, or should be, connected) is, or should be, a Christian or similar college. Through the 36 years of my professional life, through all the transitions in educational and economic enchantment and disenchantment, planning and unplanning, that it has been my doubtful privilege to experience, I have never had the smallest reason to lose faith in the teaching and learning of the humanities. Perhaps this is because I have had the opportunity to be taught by, and to learn from people of many nationalities, who have lived in accordance with their beliefs. *A dedication to the humanities is a dedication to a way of life, and it is frequently not a paying way of life.* It pays in purely material terms to turn away from history and literature, from philosophy and even

psychology (other than clinical psychology), to the utilitarian studies — economics, commerce, business management. The skills are more immediately encashable than the arts. I am not less practical than the next woman, and women are extremely practical. A developing society needs executives, technicians and technologists. But no man or woman is educated who is ignorant of the humanities, and no man or woman is fit to lead, to rule, to administer or to teach who has not at some time been grounded in the humanities or the values that they seek to inculcate for life. Science may dictate the *logical* thing to do; the humanities dictate the *honourable* thing to do, the sensitive thing to feel. No man or woman is whole who has neglected the humanities, and it is at the peril of society that their study is neglected to make possible the monopolistic triumphs of science.

Perhaps it requires both an old civilization such as ours, and colleges such as ours to see the need to combine the two cultures of science and the humanities without detriment to either, and with an instinct to keep pace with the times. If the last decade has taught us anything in college education, it is that academic pigeonholes are bad things, that knowledge, that was once fragmented, must now come together, be cross-fertilised with a multi-disciplinary approach. There is no effective study of literature, for instance, without history; no profitable study of history without its corresponding literature. There is no mastery of a traditional novel without an inter-disciplinary approach supplied by not literature only, but also history, sociology, psychology, philosophy and politics. Christian colleges are in a better position to advocate and achieve this broad spectrum of learning and teaching, because faculty forms a community that can adapt itself swiftly to new college programmes. The habit of

teamwork is healthy and can be expanded and promoted without the hysteria of revolution. Team-teaching and other experiments of this sort are more feasible in Christian colleges than elsewhere because faculty is more dedicated, more adaptable, more involved in educational innovation.

*Innovation* — there! You knew I was coming to it. Now that the word is out of the bag, I ought to pursue it with appropriate fanaticism. For the last four years, I have been teaching at a good Christian college, and for the last two years, I have been teaching at two good Christian colleges, one very old, the other very new. I am of the view that we are teaching on the lines on which our *admirable grandfathers* taught — methodically, substantially but unimaginatively for the times. The times demand much, much more. For knowledge has multiplied, there has been a revolution in science and technology, the mass media of communication and, indeed, education. The paperback has come to stay. Among those acclimatised to reading, skills are now very sharp. There are few slow readers among Honours students at good Christian colleges. This being so, the old methods are not good enough. A lecturer must be astoundingly good and, in a scholarly sense, *creative* to be listened to with the rapt attention that lecturers demand of their audiences. A paper is sometimes listened to because it is assumed to be a work of discovery or original experience. But as emphasis has shifted from teaching to learning, learners have to be consistently associated with the business of discovery. I do not ask merely for student participation as we used to do in school. I ask for student initiative all the way, and to encourage this, teachers have to be courageous. Increasingly, attendance at lectures is *poor*. Increasingly, attendance at seminars is *good*. This has to be explained and cannot be dodged

or explained away. To be listened to, teaching has to be creative, interesting and — yes, why not? — entertaining. There is some drudgery in all scholarship and in all preparation for examinations, but learning in general is not, and should not be, dull. But dull lecturers continue to exist, and as universities demand a certain percentage of compulsory attendance from students, they, the teachers, that is, have a captive audience but an *inattentive* captive audience. Once the necessary percentage of attendance is obtained, students stay away, a manifest declaration of failure in teaching. And this is happening in Christian, as in other colleges.

The issue is not merely one of qualifications. It is one of missing empathy. In the first place, as I said earlier, teachers have to keep up with modern writing in their fields and sub-fields. They have to be contemporary in attitude, idea, concept and behaviour. They will then understand why they make or do not make an impact on their students. The days are gone when a student will accept a personal relationship between him and his teacher as a substitute for intellectual stimulus. Either the teacher will do his job as it requires to be done in 1976, or he will speak to an empty classroom. Such things have been known to happen in our so-called good colleges, and there are few experiences as humiliating to the professional teacher as a deserted classroom. Yet there are teachers who have so far lost respect for themselves that they can say: "Very well, it doesn't matter. I continue to draw my salary whether or not you attend my classes."

Student evaluation is essentially a good thing though it may be wrongly used. A management should never undertake this; teachers should. But it is not unknown for rivalry among faculty to make evaluation misleading. There is still in India, and possibly elsewhere, the lack of that *professional* attitude to college teaching,

which rejoices in the expertise of others. I have known great triviality among members of the same department and of the same college. And this is a pity, because it tells permanently against the refinement of teaching and learning. If everyone has enough to do, there will be no scope for triviality of the kind I have in mind. But there generally are a few rather lazy members of staff who, though initially good, have come to be lethargic about teaching and would prefer a generally easy-going attitude to work, to the enthusiastic innovative energy that should dominate the teaching of the humanities in India today. To these people, innovative techniques spell dangers; they are set against them. I say that Christian colleges have nevertheless to continue to struggle against the dessicated old methods. Till students can take over their own learning, teaching has to go on, but the idea is to hasten the date at which the student becomes independent, not to perpetuate his tutelage.

Part of the difficulty in learning is that we are still over-stressing the need for old-time teaching. The alternative, or at least one of the alternatives is here, under our noses, and we don't see it. I am referring to a library, and of the learning process of which the library should be the hub. Despite my 63 years, most of them spent in India, I am not a cynic or pessimist. If I were, I would forfeit my claim to being an educationist, for if tomorrow cannot be better than yesterday or today through us, the college teachers of India, why do we go on at all? The optimist by definition is someone who believes that something can be done to improve man. That is why we study the humanities. That is why we emphasise them; for learning, we imply, must be man-centred. Because I believe this, I constantly ask myself from where I shall draw my strength. And I now know in India, that

there is more strength to be had from the wise dead whose books line my library shelves, than there is from the bumbling living who do not sufficiently value books. We serve the living certainly, and life here and now is larger than books, but we are in danger in the humanities in India of not being sufficiently knowledgeable to be able to mould minds. The humanities tend to be elusive, intangible. Between the lines, lies knowledge more profound than *in* the lines. Symbols, images are every scrap as important as grammatical and syntactical meaning, indeed more so, in literature. It is easy to test the acquisition of knowledge in the precise sciences in which I include mathematics. Not so easy in the humanities. For knowledge is acquired here as much through the emotions as through the intellect, through insight and intuition as through logic. How is this to be achieved? Chiefly, through the reading habit. Next, through the writing habit. The reading habit implies the constant, discerning use of the library. Move your classroom into the library. Change the conditions of day-to-day learning from the lecture-podium in the classroom with its captive, sleepy audience to a round table in a book-centred library. Only, choose your books wisely and choose your leaders with discernment. Increasingly, train students to take over their own learning. When they can do without you, your job is done.

The constant use of writing through the tutorial system is essential in the teaching of the humanities. I have little faith in objective tests except for revision of specific encapsulable content. In the cultivation of taste, in the evolution of literary judgement and artistic awareness, objective methods are, for the most part, irrelevant. The issue is not the manipulation of words; it is the discovery by students of the total effectiveness of language in communication. That we have not succeeded to date proclaims

itself from the mis-spoken and mis-written languages that we hear and read all round us. Nowhere is the pursuit of excellence so *articulately* neglected as it is in the study of language. But if it can be rescued, I believe that the colleges best equipped to achieve the rescue are the colleges such as those represented here today, with their tradition of academic ambition, their awareness of the need to create and maintain standards, their insistence on relating practice to theory, behaviour to learning, their concept of professionalism and their essential thrust forward towards continuous improvement.

All this is good, but it conceals a danger to which I said that I would return before I concluded. The chief psychological failing of Christian colleges in particular is their all too-pronounced awareness of their relative strengths in the Indian situation today. When every day underscores some new relative strength, it is hard not to grow mildly complacent. Yet this way, decay lies. No matter, members of these colleges are apt to say or think, how unsatisfactory *we* are, we are better than so-and-so. This is really not good enough. It is in effect the brink of the precipice. And so let this be my final exhortation to you. The standards that you and I have to seek are world standards, not just Indian standards. Till our students can stand up in the most progressive areas of the world and demonstrate their superiority to others in ability, integrity, that total roundedness of personality that a good college of 1976 should seek, our comparative condition in India is worth little. We have to break that imaginary sea wall, or that Himalayan wall that subsists in our minds, and that cordons the Indian peninsula off from the rest of the forward-reaching world. Let me improve on John Milton and Thomas Wolfe and say: "Look, not homeward, but outward, Angel, if you would see



how imperfect you are.” You look *homeward* to serve; you look *outward* to evaluate yourself and replenish yourself with strength for service without vanity. And when you have tested yourself against the treasure-house of the “round world’s imagined corners”, in the humanities, you will truly be a teacher. For I have come to believe that the supreme virtue in a teacher is continued dissatisfaction with himself, with his knowledge, his ability to communicate it, to penetrate to the heart of what the wise dead thought and what the living grope to say. The only unforgiveable sin in teaching the humanities is to be dead sure that you have succeeded.

## 12

## *Education and Traditional Values\**

It is easier to keep water flowing as it has always done than to re-direct a channel: it is easier to move with than against the tide. The older the country in which you live and learn, the sooner you realise that the easiest way to live is to agree; the most abiding thing to learn is what your fathers taught. Tradition appears to need no defence. It has stood the hardest of all tests, the tests of Time that includes history, with succeeding waves of revolution and reaction, enchantment, disenchantment and re-enchantment with inherited values. In such countries as ours the last word resembles the first more nearly than it does any of those valuable intermediate words upon which discussion turns and hangs and upon which (so it seems to me) the present and the future of Education rest.

Are we agreed on the basic question of what Education is? There is bound to be pretty general international agreement on what it is not, and I hope that by 1962 the peoples of the world are agreed that Education is not the accumulation of information in this or that culture or study or ology or social or physical

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\* Reproduced from *Transition* by Muriel Wasi, Atma Ram & Sons, New Delhi, 1971. (Paper presented at a Seminar organised by the Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO.)

science or fine art. Information is an aid to the educationist. It builds up a language that makes the birth and growth of ideas possible; but it does not provide him with the tools of thought. Those lie elsewhere in the evolution of a reasoning process and technique, the steady growth of the imagination, the sharpening of insight till the point at which, thrusting aside the pedestrian movement from fact to fact Gradgrind-wise, the student sees to the heart of the matter in a leap at once intuitive and logical, for all intuition is ultimately fed by the logic of centuries. The function of education *now, then and always* is to make men, women and children think clearly, think steadily, think deeply and think truly. This implies the ability to distinguish between the real that is the rational, and the real that is not susceptible of rational explanation, the notion that has been acquiesced in without scrutiny and the abiding certitude that is greater than the certainties of measurement. In this process there is room for reason and imagination, for logic and intuition, for intelligence and understanding. In it, there is no room for acceptance on faith, for reverence on and through emotion, for devotion through mysticism to the customs of ages that are perhaps picturesque, but do not stand up to the clear-eyed scrutiny of ruthless honesty.

Tradition sits upon us in India today with a complacency that is frightening to all young educationists and paralysing to those, like me, who are in the middle years. A part of our tradition is reverence for inherited ideas, way of thought and life, for the guru full of years who is presumed also to be full of honours, for age and experience, against youth and experiment.

This paper is a forthright plea for the rejection upon reason of reverence in Education, and for the acceptance as imperative educationally of the habit of critical thought.

To convert the fullstops of ages into question-marks is the first step towards getting men, women and children in the Indian subcontinent to prepare the ground for modern education. Blind faith starts with religion of all kinds, sometimes basically grand because it appeals to that which is larger than men, sometimes less grand because it is involved in a mesh of ritual and leads to an unthinking exclusiveness. This is true, more or less, of all the religions of India today and of the persisting bias in education that favours faith against criticism. In itself neither is good; both require to be examined.

I do not suggest that all spiritual problems are resolved by reason. I suggest that to hold credos without subjecting them constantly to the scrutiny of reason is always dangerous and sometimes dishonest. For belief is a kind of refuge for the unthinking. It provides that psychological and ethical citadel upon which the blows of reason leave no mark, and the trumpets of commonsense sound and resound in vain. Unhappily the walls of this citadel are very strong and do not fall. But within them rest men, who have steeled themselves against the Education that we seek in India and in 1962.

One of the dangers of the reverence I refer to is that, starting with religion, it comes in time, and sooner rather than later, to encroach upon and infect an entire way of education. To learn by rote, to use quotation as if it were argument, to cite authority for principle and precedent — all these are the consequence of placing upon a pedestal what should be on the floor. There is a tendency in our schools and colleges (and this is generally fostered), though there are splendid exceptions in all schools, some colleges and universities, there is a tendency to encourage this attitude of mind and behaviour. To judge an answer paper in literature,

history and philosophy, sociology by its length, its volume of fact, its wealth of quotation and to miss the main point, which is the author's own contribution to the subject is sufficiently general in India today to be alarming. Has the student, having diligently collected his fact, thought round it? If so, what is the evidence? Is he merely reproducing what he has assimilated in the course of this reading and listening, or is he judging that reading as a scholar should? These are questions that require constantly to be asked. It does not fall to all of us to make original discoveries in metaphysics, logic or even literature. But it surely falls to all of us to hold opinions and to make judgments that are not necessarily the transferred judgments of authority and pseudo-authority in such fields.

In my view it is better so thinking, so judging to make mistakes than unerringly, following the traditional path, to arrive at a conclusion that posterity and the stodgy present "know" to be true. As if knowing were ever final, as if Einsteins did not follow Newtons! For three parts of the business of the educational process is to travel, not hopefully necessarily, but vitally, with a constant responsiveness to stimuli, with sensibility and intellect bound together in that process of illumined integration in which idea, image and impression fuse into the streamlined pursuit of truth and excellence. Good tutors in India do not abound but they exist, and these are people who know it to be their function to get students to question what has been too easily accepted in the Humanities and the Sciences. Especially true is this of such a study as History in which the popular idea that thinking is not as necessary as it is in Science and Technology, is also (as always) the wrong idea. By what strange process of reasoning such a decision has been arrived at, and becomes, first, current and then rampant,

till good students influenced by the topical prestige and marketability of science desert the history classroom for the laboratory, I cannot tell. Following the stream, good potential teachers of history are diverted from this vital species of discovery into the more popular and paying ways of science.

Lest I should be thought to be partisan between History, that is in decline in India in 1962, and Science that is moving steadily upwards to its appointed Everest, let me allay all fears. The only partisanship of which this paper and its author are guilty, are the partisanship for reason against superstition, for the lonely, unpopular thinker who refuses to be stampeded by waves of popular opinion and economic pressure into sacrificing the abiding truth that History, like Science, has to be exacting to be good. It may even be more exacting than Science because it is harder to verify. The student has, therefore, to be more cautious, not less so in his judgments. In dealing with the story of that which is not measurable or predictable, History has necessarily to draw upon imaginative experience. No doubt Science has also to do this and the stroke of genius that comes once a century or so is in reality the climax of a long procession of routine good work in which, somewhere, the flash of inspiration lies in nucleus awaiting the appropriate moment for discovery.

The second traditional value with which I would like to concern myself today is the value that places simplicity and austerity in living above comfort and a high standard of living. The whole treasury of the world's proverbs would appear to support the traditional Indian position on this. Cut your coat according to your cloth. We ants never borrow, we ants never lend. Waste not, want not. Kind hearts are more than coronets. Many a mickle makes a muckle. It is easier for a camel to pass

through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. All this has a place somewhere in our thoughts as a corrective to the opposite that makes wealth a virtue and its pursuit, the business of the common man. Yet today in India what our Education most lacks is the ability to think with large, clear-eyed, feet-on-the-earth practicality.

Not long ago, I was in the Philippines to attend an Education Editors' Conference, and was introduced to the Community School of that country. Wherever I went I saw gaily coloured flower-pots, neatly gravelled paths and all the paraphernalia of daily routine entertainment. I was not surprised to see the schools so well-attended and the children so clean and tidy. For, surely, this is clear to men the world over today, as it is, has always been clear to women and children — a pretty school is the first step towards a good school. A school must attract children, not repel them by its hideousness. It is true that brick-and-mortar do not make a school, but no school can stand for long without brick and mortar. Yet with our traditional notions of austerity, the last thing that we seek to make a school is 'attractive'. A school is a building into which you send children to be rid of them. Stern, dark, uninviting, the inflexible laws of simplicity and austerity combine to make these places, that should be so well-remembered for joy and light and that sudden insight into what often felt to be, but is now seen to be, places of cold instruction.

It is not surprising that this background of poverty informs the lives of our children for many years after they have left an elementary school. The slipshod is accepted; we can do no better. Dirt is accepted; we can do no better. It costs money to have shining floors and clean walls. I returned recently from a tour of colleges in a big city and can testify that every time I came across

a good airy new modern building my heart leaped, my mind expanded to take in new ideas. For even we in the middle years can be educated by beauty, and beauty today appears to demand expenditure. Yet it is part of our insistent way of life to put money by, that should be spent. Savings campaigns may be patriotic from time to time, but there is by and large and in the long run, no virtue in either saving as a technique of living or in poverty as a way of thought and life. Such attitudes breed meanness, deprive the mind of its elasticity and run the risk of translating themselves into mean human relationships. They oust magnanimity, the generous impulse, the sustained habit of giving. I have observed for many years with unspoken distress, the acceptance in my country as a tradition, of the second-rate in preference to the first-rate even where we can afford the first-rate. And all this, because we are putting by for that proverbial rainy day that may perhaps never come, what should be spent today. If whole families over a subcontinent go on with this forever, we shall never have communities such as those of the Philippines that regard it as their bounden duty to support pretty schools. We shall never be able to shape public opinion to the wisdom of public and private expenditure on Education and the social appurtenances that make Education possible. A wise man once said, perhaps to offset the traditional omnibus of proverbs in favour of caution and providence: for every ten men who can save money, there is only one who can spend it wisely. For that is what economy means: it means wise expenditure, wise management, not the automatic impulse to hoard and then to pass barren gold or jewellery down to those who, to have diamonds in their ears, cast away the pearl of great price. This calls for a re-statement of priorities in national living so that those who live well, and not merely the meek shall inherit the land.

Abolish the tradition of reverence and replace it by the critical habit. Abolish the traditional notion that simplicity and austerity are good in themselves and replace them by the ability to spend and to live one's life with joy and vitality. We come to a third traditional value that modern India cannot afford to perpetuate, namely, the tradition of clouding in mystery what should be clearly understood and discussed in our classrooms and universities. I refer to the mysteries that surround sex. All this is bound up with our notion of what is right for society. Order, above all things. Women shall, therefore, be placed upon a pedestal that was not too high for Sita but may be too high for her modern opposite. The virtues that we have venerated without sufficient examination — purity, chastity at any price — now require to be examined. Again, as a choice between these and their opposites — licentiousness, looseness, one would obviously prefer the Indian tradition. But the old virtues must not be taken for granted, since they close the mind to its natural impulses and duties. They must be re-examined. In themselves, these vaunted virtues may, indeed, stultify and reduce mental energy. They may keep a nation clouded, dark and weak. If science ever had a part to play in the life of the nation, surely this is it — that it should invade the private life of every citizen, male and female, and cast the light of candour, reason and forthright good sense upon what has been tucked away under a false sense of propriety and because we are — let's face it — afraid to see the implications of knowledge. But knowledge in this kind protects; it does not expose young girls and boys to the dangers that beset them with ignorance. In every college, of every university in the country, and even in the upper classes of Higher Secondary Schools, sex instruction is essential today. It is also essential in our present

economy to explain and re-explain that large families are not divine gifts but prodigality that India cannot afford.

And this brings me to my last point. It is part of our inherited temper to ask to be analytic down to the smallest implication of an idea. We have no difficulty spelling out the theoretic implications of an idea, a proposition, a relationship. The educational problems of all nations today demand that this analytic faculty shall be exercised, and we might be presumed therefore to be a fortunately gifted people. The educational problems of old countries also, however, demand that they shall in their old age be adaptable countries that, having seen a problem, shall address themselves to its solution, first, with courage, then, with commonsense and, finally, with whole-heartedness.

With our analytic insight we often see to the heart of a problem. As we have not inherited any gift for swift or concerted executive action, and as we often enjoy the exercise of analysis, we do not go on to the business of constructive healing action with anything like the speed with which we resolve any analytic implications in our minds. Result: what is to be done is clear. What is in fact done either lags behind what should be done for months and years, or gets done in a rather haphazard blundering way. Concerted, responsible, timely, efficient action is still not a traditional way of life in India, and it is this, more than anything else, that accounts for the tardy solution of educational problems.

Having, for instance, accepted the theory of democracy we have seen to the heart of its implications in a country of over 400 million people. We have not been slow to see the need for compulsory primary education. In the more difficult reaches of secondary and university education, we are as yet feeling our way for the reason, primarily, that the implications of democracy are

at conflict with our capacity to pay for it in ordinary economic-educational terms and to decide what, with limited resources, we shall list as priorities.

The problem of numbers at university level is soluble on a national scale only if you have decided effectively to make secondary education a terminus for all those who are, for one reason or another, unfitted for higher education. This effective terminus — action at secondary level we have not yet succeeded in taking 15 years from Independence. The problem at university level has, therefore, squarely to be faced. The maintenance of standards demands that only those shall be admitted to universities even in a democracy who are fit for such an education. Not the wildest interpreters of democracy in 1962 in any part of the world would insist that, with limited resources for education, we could declare university education a fundamental right. Even if these resources were not limited, I doubt if educationally such a case could be made out. And yet the argument swings backwards and forwards in the press and on public platforms in India. Admit them all. Admit third divisioners. Do not have entrance tests or vivas. Provide for everybody. And all this is urged in the name of democracy.

In these matters, with all her traditional values of persuasiveness, gentleness and tolerance, India has now to take a stand that is categorical, firm and rigid. A university education, like a scholarship in 1962, has to be earned; it cannot be assumed to be a fundamental right. It has to be earned on merit exclusively. It is no more the prerogative of the rich and the noble, than it is of the pushing and the greedy. It is the reward of academic ability and industry. If we “accept” too much, we go in danger of acquiescing educationally and socially in what should be wiped out with the inflexible determination with which a democracy at

war can work. And we are at war — educationally we are at war with ignorance, superstition and the dead-weight of centuries. We cannot afford to accept or tolerate these things. We need strong brooms to sweep away the cobwebs of the years. If, therefore, we seek to cling to the traditional value of a much-vaunted tolerance, let us not misinterpret it to mean the acceptance of what is without relevance or value for the times. We live in 1962. If we must accept the traditional values of patience and persuasiveness, let us also recognise that Time is our master and that it is vital *here and now* in 1962 to abandon the luxury of analysis for urgent executive action, that is practicable and implies collective and harmonious work in the immediate present. For, in the long run we are all dead. Too much tolerance in anything is bad; an intellect that retards action is also bad. Both must be re-formed.

I am sorry to have seemed so iconoclastic for one who is actually in favour of much that exists, and is certainly not against the essential values of harmony, persuasiveness and basic human tolerance. But there never was any national or individual progress that did not involve the rejection of what is outworn, and traditions that have outlived their usefulness are too obvious a liability for India to continue to bear. If, finally, you find it hard to forgive my unorthodoxy on national grounds, let me seek with a flippancy that is also a departure from our traditional value of solemnity, international forgiveness. You cannot have a Unescan omelette without breaking a few Indian eggs.